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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

No. 555.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., June 12, 1889.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. XLIII.



OR,

The Rivals of Rack-about Range.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "NOR'WEST NICK,"
"MONTE JIM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SNAKES IN THE GRASS.

"STEADY, boy! What's the matter with you?"

The loose reins tightened and a touch of the heavy spur brought the flitting tail down, but the full nostrils quivered, the small ears pricked forward, and the prominent eyes shone brightly in the rays of the declining sun as they remained fixed on the tall grass which at that point bordered the indistinct trail. Plainer than human speech did this gallant animal by its actions warn its master of peril, and at almost any other time Rex Pollard would have been quick to understand and prompt to act.

Just now his thoughts were dark and bitter, divided between the past and the future, leaving scant room for present heed.

True, his right hand dropped upon the polish-

THEN CURVING AROUND IT APPEARED THE BLOOD RED LETTERS:
"WHO KILLED BAILEY THORPE?"

ed butt of a heavy revolver resting against his hip, but the action was purely instinctive, as was the rapid glance which he cast over the tall grass. A full score of bitter enemies might easily have found ambushment there without fear of being discovered save by an actual search, but the young rancher never gave that a thought, just then.

A slender spray of grass close to the trail bent over beneath the weight of a long, thick body as a huge "bull-snake" crawled into the trail, cresting high its yellow and black head to emit the peculiar note which gives it its name, before passing on to vanish amidst the tall grass of the other side.

"So! is that it, Cap?" muttered Pollard, the ghost of a smile flitting across his swarthy face as he noted the serpent. "Ugly enough to look at, but you'd ought to be used to the like by this. If there were no worse snakes in the grass, this world would be pretty nigh a paradise on wheels!"

There seemed a sharp sting in the thought, for Rex Pollard struck his spurs almost viciously into the quivering flanks of his good steed, slackening the rein as he did so.

Cap leaped forward, snorting loudly, but even this indignity seemed insufficient to banish the sudden fear which he had imbibed with the faint breeze floating across the curving tops of the rank grass stalks.

The hot breath puffed from his wide nostrils, and his great eyes seemed ready to drop from their sockets as they remained fixed on—what?

Rex Pollard began to wonder, for never before had his good horse served him after this fashion.

Instinctively his gaze took the same direction, and the last rays of the sun dazzled him for the moment as the half-globe met his eyes squarely. His left hand flew up and rested its sharp edge against his forehead.

That action betrayed the one point of physical imperfection in the stalwart young ranchero, for the hand was thumbless, a wrinkled scar showing where that member had been amputated or torn violently from its place.

Tall, long-limbed, broad-shouldered, few men could make a better show in the saddle than the owner of the Shuttlecock Ranch, and still fewer in that section—locally known as "Rack-about Range"—were as handsome in the face as was Rex Pollard; even now when that face was far thinner than usual, marked by deep lines that age had no finger in tracing.

Dark almost as the skin of a Mexican, but with a clear, healthy tinge far different from the smoky hue belonging to that country. With mustaches and beard, leaving only half of his cheeks bare. With close-cropped hair, jetty black, and showing an inclination to curl. With a short nose, curved, thin-bridged and flexible-nostriled. With eyes deep-set, yet frank and honest in their keen glances from beneath the ebon brows. With strong, passionate manhood showing in every line, every feature.

His garb was somewhat careless, yet becoming to the man; a loose sack coat of dark brown corduroy, with trousers of the same material, the latter hidden to the knees in riding-boots of fine leather. He wore no vest, but the front of his flannel shirt was daintily embroidered with silk, in scarlet or navy blue. The rolling collar was open, a silk kerchief knotted loosely about his throat. A dark gray felt hat completed his dress, to the casual glance.

About his waist was buckled a belt of russet leather, supporting the usual pair of holsters from which peeped the butts of revolvers, and covered with loops for holding the cartridges used by those convenient tools.

Dazzled for the moment by that incautious glance full at the glowing red disk, Rex Pollard half-closed his lids, even as his mutilated left hand flew up as a shield.

Only for that he might possibly have escaped the doom that menaced him: with that he failed to catch a glimpse of what frightened his horse afresh, until too late.

Almost in a line with the vanishing sun, the head and shoulders of a man rose quickly above the bending tops of the coarse grass, swinging the snaky coils of a lariat just long enough to make his aim sure before casting.

The best of *vaqueros* could not have improved that cast, and even before the wide noose hung above the arching neck of the alarmed horse, what seemed its shadow came shooting across from the opposite side of the trail, while still a third coil sprung from the rear, closing over the head and shoulders of the young ranchero, flattening the mutilated left hand across his face as a vicious jerk drew the noose tight about his person.

"He's my meat! Stiddy the boss, durn ye!" came a harsh, croaking voice from where the third lasso shot up out of the grass. "Ef—down comes yer meat-house, pardner!"

Rex Pollard made a desperate effort to cast off that deadly loop and snatch a pistol from his belt, but on the instant his captor gave the lasso such a vicious jerk that, his horse plunging forward at the same time, the ranchero was plucked bodily from his saddle, falling to the ground, striking on his head and shoulders with a shock that scattered his senses most effectually.

"Hold the critter—play anchor, durn ye!" blurted out the chief of the rascals, deftly keeping his own *riata* taut as he moved toward his particular portion of the capture. "We need the boss mighty nigh as bad as we do the man-critter!"

It was a waste of breath, however, for after that one instinctive start, the steed stopped short, shivering convulsively as it felt those horrible coils tightening about its neck, the strain coming from opposite directions. Its early lessons had not been forgotten.

"Good boys the hull team o' us!" laughed the chief as he shortened his lariat and drew nearer to his captive. "Ef I hain't snapped the neck o'—Play ye don't, Rex Pollard!"

Though the fall had been severe enough to have killed many a stout fellow, the young ranchero made an effort to rise and draw a weapon. Only to be flattened out again by a savage jerk of the lasso, and before he could do more, the red-headed rascal had pounced upon him.

With sinewy fingers fairly melting about his neck, with the whole weight of his bony yet muscular body resting on the back of his victim, the ruffian still seemed in fear lest the prize should escape him, for he harshly cried out:

"Nail the boss, Dan—hyar, Bark? Will ye? Play ye don't, then!"

Though taken at such a fearful disadvantage, Rex Pollard fought desperately to free himself from that ugly incubus, his long, lithe figure writhing like a snake, the muscles of his neck swelling tensely as he fought against suffocation, every nerve and sinew doing its level best. And though the odds were so overwhelmingly in his favor, the red-headed rascal gave a grunt of intense relief as he felt one of his partners in crime fasten upon the unruly legs of the ranchero.

"Wuss then a five-year Maverick to throw an' tie!" panted the fellow, throwing his weight upon his stiffened arms and burying the face of his captive in the grass. "Chaw dirt, critter! An' tell 'em I made ye do it! Me—Tick Slater—no less!"

While he was tasting this bit of triumph, his comrade was deftly at work with a short length of rope, binding the ankles of the ranchero firmly together.

"My end's all cozy, mate; how's yours?"

"It's gittin' thar—gittin' thar mighty slow, though!" with a fresh grunt of disgust as Pollard gathered his failing energies into a last fierce effort to free himself. "Billy-be-durned ef ever I see sech a crooked, cross-grained—"

"Shell I lend him a crack on the cabeza, Tick?" coolly asked the third ruffian at that juncture, coming up after having secured Cap by a turn of the lasso about a picket-pin.

"Pin his fins an'—that's the fu'st glimp' o' good sense I ever knowed out o' ye!"

His powers exhausted by that last fierce struggle, or else realizing the utter folly of fighting against such growing odds, Rex Pollard abruptly relaxed his muscles, lying limply on the ground.

"Devil trust ye fer me!" grimly laughed the red-headed rough as he cautiously maintained his grip while shifting his person so that his mates could the more readily carry out his instructions. "Rope his daddles, boys, an' don't stop fer to count the tightness—jest so ye pinch 'em plenty big! Durned ef I wouldn't rather mount Jimmy Dean's broncho bar-backed then to straddle this pizen critter ag'in."

"He's blooded, ye know, an' mighty heap proud o' his pedigree," grinned the other as he brought the rancher's hands together behind his back.

"Hope he'll pan out 'nough fer to pay fer the trouble."

"His hide an' taller'll fetch that much," coarsely laughed Tick Slater, for the first time slackening the grip of his dirty paws.

He picked up the dingy slouch hat which had fallen from his mat of red hair during the struggle, slapping back the brim in front as his mates lifted their captive to a sitting posture, as though he rather gloried in the fact thus fairly exposed to view.

The face of a human brute, as might have been expected from his recent words and actions; a face nearly hidden in a bristling mass of wiry hair, red as the brush of a courting fox.

Eyes that protruded far from their sockets, bleared and reddened by strong drink and evil passions. A nose that was curved like the beak of a horned owl, but not half as handsome. Gorilla-like jaws, with front teeth that resembled tusches in all save regularity. At all times exposed to view, just now these tusches lent a sullen ferocity to the smile with which the ruffian was viewing his captive.

"It is you, Tick Slater?" slowly uttered Rex Pollard, a dangerous glow filling his black eyes as he spoke. "So you've taken to butchery as well as stealing?"

CHAPTER II.

TICK SLATER AFTER A DIVIDEND.

"NOT ef you don't make it turn out that way, pardner," nodded the ruffian, his grin growing more pronounced and still more ugly.

"What do you expect to gain by this outrage, then?"

"Call it speckilation, pardner, ef you've any marcy onto your own weasel-skin. Fer I'm jest the sort o' critter that kin measure every crooked word by its bigness in round dollars."

"You can pick my pockets, now my hands are tied, but you'll get little by that. And still less by speculating on the future. I'll not charge you a cent for the rope that hangs you for this outrage."

Tick Slater was not smiling, now, save involuntarily as the peculiar formation of his jaws compelled. He had not calculated on this cool nerve, spiced with a contempt that stung through even his thick hide.

"They's a rope thar, but the noose ain't built 'cordin' to my neck," he growled, at the same time holding up his bony left hand, working his thumb as though to call particular attention to its presence. "See anythin' missin' 'bout that flipper? Reckon it'd print red an' show only four branches? Ouf! it sets well on your tongue to croak o' pullin' hemp, don't it, now?"

Rex Pollard turned ghastly pale at that significant query, his eyes catching a lurid glow and the veins starting out on his temples as he flung all his strength into one desperate effort to burst the bonds which had been applied to his limbs.

Tick Slater involuntarily shrunk back a pace, his hands dropping to one of his revolvers at his middle, but his two mates quickly fastened upon the enraged ranchero, gripping him tightly as though they, too, half feared he might break away from their toils.

"I'll kill you for those words, you devil!" hoarsely cried Pollard as he suddenly gave over his vain efforts.

"'Twouldn't make the fu'st notch on yer stick, would it?" grinned Slater, maliciously. "But talkin' ain't business. Git him ready fer to straddle his critter, boys. Sun's down, an' they's heap plenty ter to do afore the yaller light comes up ag'in."

Tick Slater strode over to where Cap stood fastened, plucking up the iron picket-pin, coiling the lasso and then leading the horse to where its master stood between his two guards.

The rope had been removed from one ankle, and the two men lifted the rancher into his own saddle, then deftly knotting the loose end of the rope about his free ankle, beneath the horse's belly.

"It'd fit the contrariness o' ye better ef I was to hitch ye by the neck to yer critter's tail," nodded Slater, holding the bridle as his comrades hastened away through the tall grass to a deeper portion of the swale, from whence they quickly came leading three horses. "But I'm gwine to treat ye pure white ontel ye make me putt on the dirt to hold ye level."

Pollard had turned his head to note the movements of the two fellows, and sharply bit his lips as he saw them reappear with their horses. Now he understood what had alarmed honest Cap. If he had only paid more attention! If he had only had his usual wits about him!

Tick Slater laughed softly as he rightly interpreted that look and action.

"They's times when the sharpest makes a slip, pardner, an' this was your evenin'. Fer a bit I was powerful skeered that you'd smell a mice, an' I hed ye lined mighty true. I said I'd corral ye this trip, an' I 'lowed to do it ef I didn't ketch nothin' better then cold meat. But it's all right now."

"What are you going to do with me, you scoundrel?"

"Squart ye on a weenty bit of a ride—nothin' wuss right now," was the prompt response as the other two rascals came up with their horses. "But ef you're anyway oneasy, mebber you'd best be prayin' that we don't meet up with anybody while ridin'."

He swung himself into the saddle, reflectively adding:

"An' yit—I don't know! They do say shoot-in' is a easier way o' crossin' the divide then by the rope route!"

With left hand gripping the bridle of his captive's horse, Tick Slater crossed to the left of the trail, leaving it almost at right angles as he faced the east.

Dan West and Bark Adams rode one on each side of the prisoner, the heads of their horses on a line with Pollard's body, each man watchful and alert like beings who fully appreciate the value of their charge.

Pollard said nothing, only the deep lines above his eyes showing how fully he realized the peril of his situation.

The sun had sunk to rest, and already the shades of night were growing thick upon the prairie, rendering distant objects indistinct.

"All eyes open, boys!" muttered Slater, his own organs keenly roving ahead and to either hand. "They ain't grass enough fer kiver now, an' ef any stray critter looms up, we want to ketch the fu'st glimp'!"

Fortunately for their plans, the plain seemed deserted by all save their own party, and presently Tick Slater drew a long breath of relief as they neared a compact clump of timber, something more than half a mile from the trail in which they had captured the ranchero.

"Timber big enough fer hangin' ain't always a comfortable sight to fellers on the range," he grinned, turning to peer into the face of his

prisoner, "but ef you're hafe-ways white an' decent, pardner, they won't none o' them trees b'ar two-legged apples this bout. Eh?"

Pollard flashed a menacing glance back, but said nothing. And Tick Slater seemed content to await a more favorable opportunity for adding to his covert taunts.

Slater sprung from the saddle and entered the timber in advance, remaining absent for a few moments, leaving his mates in charge of the prisoner. When he did reappear, it was to harshly bid them set free Pollard's feet and lift him from the saddle.

When this was done, his sinewy left hand closed on the rancher's collar, forcing him to enter the motte until near its center, where was a small open space, free from brush, though not a ray of light could sift through the interlocking branches overhead.

"Start a bit of fire, boys."

As in all things else, Slater was promptly obeyed, West and Adams quickly gathering a quantity of dry wood and kindling a blaze.

As soon as the ruddy light shot up, Slater rudely knocked Pollard's feet from under him, seating him abruptly on the ground, with his back against the trunk of a tree, laughing as he said, coarsely:

"Better at the foot than up a limb, pardner! Take a hitch on his trotters, lads!"

This was quickly done, Pollard making no resistance. From what he had already experienced he knew that would be worse than useless. He must bide his time. When that came—

"You'll make the teeth meet, eh?" laughed Slater, seemingly gifted with the power of reading every change in that darkly handsome visage.

"I'll not forget you, be sure of that, you cowardly cur!" flashed the ranchman, with deadly earnestness in look and tone.

"I don't reckon ye will, when I'm got through with ye, pardner. Ef I could think it, mebbe I'd hit ye lighter. Now, ef ye git off with a bit o' hide to kiver the bones o' ye—waal, you're in big luck!"

He satisfied himself that the bonds were well applied and that it would be impossible for Pollard to get free without assistance, then he turned aside to speak hurriedly to his mates.

The ranchman listened as keenly as possible, for under his seeming nerve lay a real fear for his life, but sharp as was his sense of hearing, he failed to catch any but the concluding words.

"You know what, so do it!"

West and Adams left the little glade, and as he listened Pollard a few moments later heard the rapid beating of hoofs as the two men rode away from the timber at a gallop.

"They're mighty good pards, but 'tain't al'ays best fer ter take in a bull crowd when they's jest snug room fer two," laughed Slater, coming back after dropping a few sticks on the fire, squatting on his heels in front of his captive, cramming bits of plug tobacco into a badly burnt pipe. "Now you an' me—that's jest comfortable—eh?"

"What are you playing for, Slater?" demanded Pollard, with an effort holding back his fierce contempt for the rascal. "If you think to get more than you can steal from my pockets right now, you're off!"

"Mebbe yes an' mebbe no," nodded Slater, reaching backward for a blazing brand with which to light his pipe.

"If you know anything at all, you ought to know that. Satan himself can't drive me against my will; and you're only one of his lowest, meanest, most contemptible imps!"

Hotly, fiercely those last words flashed forth, and despite the physically helpless condition of the ranchman, Slater shrunk away, dropping his pipe and scattering the tobacco.

Pollard laughed hardly, his eyes blazing with scorn at this fresh evidence of cowardice.

"Who is at your back in this, Tick Slater?"

"Nobody, durn ye!" growled the ruffian, picking up his pipe and replenishing its bowl. "An' I reckon you'll find I'm heap plenty 'nough afore you git to the end—yes, you jest will, now!"

"One more lie," coolly nodded Pollard. "You can steal a hog if you found it asleep. You might even pluck up enough to run off a couple of sheep or a steer on a dark night. But this—who's put you up to such a job, Tick? A job that will end in your biting dirt, mind you!"

"Ef it does, you won't be takin' notice how much I spit an' sputter over the meal, Rex Pollard," grimly nodded the ruffian, puffing out a cloud of blue vapor. "You'll be thinkin' heap more 'bout how durned oncomfortable snug some people knows how to make a man w'ar his collar. You'll be cussin' the time that pulled that left thumb o' yourn off its base—you will!"

Pollard caught his breath sharply, his face growing pale as that of a corpse. Not with fear, though Slater laughed coarsely as though he so interpreted that sudden emotion.

"What has my hand got to do with your roping me, Slater?" he asked, his tones low and strained from intense passion. "Out with it, you cur! I'm bound hand and foot, helpless as a new-born babe. You're armed to the teeth.

Out with it! Or shall I turn my face aside to give you a spark more courage?"

"I ain't kickin' at the face o' ye, pardner," grinned the ruffian, gaining in coolness as his adversary seemed to lose it. "I've met wuss lookin' ones on a dark night, an' you're heap prittier then you'd 'a' bin back yen' when the gang wanted fer to run you up a limb, ef you hedn't bin smart 'nough to fix a halibi up so snug—yes you be."

A dry stick snapped in two, and a bright flame shot up, showing the red drops trickling from the ranchman's lips, where his teeth had unconsciously met through the flesh.

Slater caught the sight and laughed anew.

"Lucky you hain't got on a bald-faced shirt, pardner, though I don't reckon you'd ever use your left hand ag'in, that way!"

"You devil!" grated Pollard, desperately wrestling with his bonds. "If ever I get free, I'll kill you by inches for that taunt!"

"It's a resk I'm countin' in, boss," coolly nodded the ruffian, as that brief paroxysm of rage spent itself without affecting the ropes. "It's part of the stakes I'm puttin' up ag'inst you in this leetle game fer rocks. An' now—when be I goin' fer to finger my divvy?"

Like magic all sign of rage vanished from face and figure of the captive rancher. His eyes were glowing, but that was all. His face might have been a mask carved out of solid ice, so far as emotion went.

Did his ears catch the faint rustle among the undergrowth beyond the range of the little fire? Did that cautious sound lend him fresh hope? Was he counting on assistance from an unseen friend?

"What do you mean, Tick Slater?" he slowly demanded.

"I mean business, chuck-up!" nodded the ruffian. "I mean that I've held my hush long a-plenty! I mean—when'll I git my sheer o' what you made out o' that Bailey Thorpe a'fair?"

CHAPTER III.

AN UNPREMEDITATED BATH.

"WILL the truth never be revealed? Must I suffer doubly—suffer to the end of time?"

In little more than a groan came these words, and Imo Thorpe bowed her head, a shiver shaking her proud form as her forehead touched the strong railing surrounding that strange landmark.

Strange indeed!

A frame of heavy square timbers, fastened together after the old style of gallows; upright, arm and braces, even to the rope noose dangling from the heavy iron ring; all painted a gloomy black.

As far as the eye could reach in any direction that rolling, irregular stretch of country showed no signs of human habitation, and only a bit of hill, or a distant clump of timber broke the monotonous scenery.

A strange landmark in itself, but stranger still from the fact that only one man in all the world knew precisely for whose benefit it had been erected, though not a human being within a circuit of many score miles but could promptly tell you what were the words deeply carved into that strong upright:

"For the foul assassin of Bailey Thorpe!"

It was a stern, menacing memento of a murder most foul, and nearly a year had passed by since bluff Chester Thorpe caused its erection and with his own hand carved those letters deep in the wood.

Eleven months, and still the gallows had not performed its terrible duty.

Imo Thorpe was not the first, not the only one to wonder if the strong arm would ever bear the repulsive fruit for which it was intended.

"It will—it shall!" she cried, her usually pleasant tones hard and almost harsh as she lifted her bowed head and gazed with blazing eyes toward the paling heavens. "I have sworn—I renew my oath, and as I keep it sacred even so may be my reward."

She rose to her feet and fastened the broad-brimmed riding hat to her brown hair, a tinge of color coming back to her fair cheeks as a low, fond whimper broke from the velvet muzzle of her good horse.

The steed struck the hard earth sharply with one hoof, then dropped upon its knees, whimpering again as though begging its fair young mistress to hasten away from that gruesome spot before the shadows of night should catch them.

It was one of the pretty little tricks taught it by its mistress in happier days, but it brought a choking sob up in her throat as she saw it performed now; for he—her kind, noble father—he whose dastardly assassination was darkly remembered by that forbidding gallows—had been her laughing aid in thus training her pet mount.

Notwithstanding that hint was enough, and with a quick spring Imo Thorpe regained her saddle, a caressing touch giving her steed permission to regain his feet.

"Another day gone, and still no clew!" murmured the maiden, shivering as she gazed upon that grim memento. "But it will come—it must

come! Another month of this awful torture will kill me!"

With a visible effort she broke the horrible fascination exerted over her by that unchristened gallows, averting her face and touching Dandy with the gilt spur at her heel, giving him free rein as he sped away over the nearly level stretch of ground lying between Rocky Ford and the spot where her father, Bailey Thorpe, owner of the "Diamond Cross" brand and ranch, had been found cold and ghastly in death one fair morning nearly a year ago.

Imo was young, strong, full of life, never having known an hour of sickness, her life unclouded until shortly before that awful night during which she had watched and waited in vain for the father who could never come to her on his own feet. She was strong and healthy yet, though sorrow and suspense had robbed her cheeks of their plumpness and of their rich color in part. And now that that grim gallows was no longer staring into her eyes, she began to look more her old self as Dandy bore her so swiftly, so smoothly over the plain.

Not quite. The gay, mischievous sparkle was never seen in her great blue eyes now, and there was a pathetic droop to the corners of her red-lipped mouth that told of much sorrow and bitter brooding.

Dandy was almost enough to make a perfect horsewoman, she had been wont to declare in parrying the many compliments which her stock-growing neighbors had been wont to pay her. His long, smooth strides made the saddle almost as easy as a cushioned rocking-chair, and barring his unconquerable fear of a snake, Dandy was perfect as a lady's horse.

That fear was strongly illustrated just then, the frightened animal stopping short and bounding swiftly to one side with a shrill snort of terror as a sluggish rattlesnake sounded its shrill skir-r-r just in time to keep from being crushed beneath those trim hoofs.

Many a good rider would have been hurled from the saddle by that sudden start, and hardly one whose thoughts were so far away as those of Imo Thorpe just then, but must have come to grief.

As it was, the maiden seemed hardly shaken in her seat, the incident speaking more for her superb skill than columns of empty words.

"Steady, Dandy!" came sharply from her red lips as her gloved right hand drew a small but effective revolver from the belt girdling her trim waist.

The power of her voice was proved by the instant quiet which came over the frightened animal. Steady as a rock it stood, only the wild flashing in its great eyes betraying how gladly it would have dashed away from that feared reptile.

The irritated snake was still sounding its warning rattle, its neck crested, its lance-shaped head ready to strike; but only for a single breath.

A bright blue eye glanced over the polished tube, and with the sharp explosion that jeweled head vanished, the rustling coils knotting up amidst the dust stirred up by its death agonies.

"If it was only that other serpent! only the cruel reptile whose fangs tore the poor throat of my darling!" broke from the lips of the maiden as she threw out the empty shell and replaced it by another.

"Heaven speed the time—for come it must and shall!"

Something in the thought, or perhaps it was this proof that her long and steady practicing had rendered her eye and hand marvelously true and steady, even for that land of firearms, seemed to lighten the cloud which had fallen over Imo Thorpe while visiting the gallows dedicated to the murderer of her father. Whatever the cause, her face grew softer, more truly feminine as Dandy, with a parting snort at the still writhing serpent, curved around and once more stretched out in a long, easy 'lope toward Rocky Ford.

A face as beautiful as the figure was perfect in its gracefully rounded contour: a face that only lacked a bit of color, a touch of maidenly softness to be perfect in its charms.

Not yet out of her teens, Imo Thorpe had aged years during those few months of anguish such as, fortunately, few girls are called upon to endure in these civilized days; but she was still by long odds the beauty of Rack-about Range, still the reigning toast of every convivial meeting throughout that section.

She was tall for her sex, and admirably proportioned, with glossy brown hair and arched brows. Her eyes were blue as the summer sky, and a year before had been gay as the gayest, full of mirth and maidenly archness. Now they seemed bluer than ever, but they rarely laughed, and the sparkle changed to a steady glow.

Without further break, Dandy covered the space lying between the black painted gallows and the crossing of Roaring Fork, slackening his pace as he neared the deep cut through the plain or plateau, daintily picking his way down the steep trail leading to the water.

Imo roused from her dark reverie sufficiently to tighten the reins and guard against a possible mishap from the loose stones which lay thickly along the cut, but slackening them again as

Dandy splashed into the swiftly running water, whimpering faintly as he anticipated the drink he felt his labors well had earned.

It was a crude crossing, where art had only slightly aided nature by rolling aside or shattering a few of the larger rocks, for wheeled vehicles were rarely used on Rack-about Range, and nearly all who passed to and fro might easily be styled rough-riders.

At this point Roaring Fork widened and shoaled, at ordinary times with scarce a foot of water at the ford, though in flood times the river had been known to rise beyond even its towering banks of stone.

The ford itself was formed of a rocky ledge, abruptly breaking off at the lower side, a deep pool of water swirling with bubbles born of the thick-lying rocks and boulders just above.

Here many a prime fish might be spied resting with hungry eyes on the alert for stray food from the shallows above, and almost without thought Imo leaned over in the saddle to see if the light was still sufficient for her to recognize the big fellow whom she had more than once pricked sharply with hook in the early days of their acquaintance, before pain and peril taught the cunning old fellow to beware of the daintily manipulated lure.

Dandy was drinking, muzzle deep buried in the clear, clear, cold water, greedily sucking in the grateful element after his long gallop. And never before was he so wholly unsuspecting of his natural aversion.

A huge water snake came sweeping around a moss-grown rock with the swift current, almost striking against Dandy's cheek before either realized the proximity of the other. With a vicious splash the startled reptile dove, its tail fairly curling across the eyes of the poor horse, who gave a choking snort and plunged violently back, tripping on a slippery rock, falling heavily over.

Taken completely unawares, leaning over in the saddle, Imo was pitched headlong from her seat into the deep pool below the ford, vanishing amidst a splatter of bubbles and glittering drops, scaring that unlucky serpent almost out of its glistening hide.

Imo rose almost instantly, none the worse for that involuntary plunge save for a bit of choking with water, but though she swiftly dashed the blinding drops from her eyes and turned to regain the safe footing afforded by the ford, it was too late.

The swift current had already swept her half a dozen yards below the ledge, and with a choking cry she saw Dandy recover his footing and plunge furiously across the ford, regaining the bank they had recently left, his fall having turned his head in that direction.

"Help—Dandy—"

A little wave struck her in the face and choked off her speech. She seemed sinking, and though she was hardly her usual self, something of her nerve came back just when it was needed most.

Her arms sunk beneath the surface and her palms began to play like the fins of a fish, lifting her lips above the surface and permitting her eyes to glance swiftly around her.

It was purely mechanical, however, for she knew the stream thoroughly, and knew that even could she gain either bank, just here, to escape by that means was altogether out of the question. A goat could hardly have scaled those precipitous banks, much less a woman burdened by wet and heavy garments.

"Can I make it?" flashed through her dizzy brain as she turned her face down-stream with the rapid current. "Can I hold out that long?"

Half a mile down the river she knew of a possible landing in case her bodily powers should hold out so long. But would they—with her riding-habit dragging her down?

She could swim, slightly, but that skill was hardly more than sufficient to enable her to keep her head above water, and to gain the landing in her mind, she knew she would have to fight hard against the swift current as it rounded the curve and hugged the opposite shore.

"The rock! can I make it?" flashed through her mind as the current swept her around the first curve below the ford.

CHAPTER IV.

MAKING THE MOST OF IT.

THERE was little time to spare in doubts or hopes, for already the flat rock in question met her eager gaze as the bend was rounded, and the same glance showed her that if left to itself, the current would sweep her past the refuge far beyond its friendly space.

The rock rose only a foot or so above the surface of the water, but it was dry and large enough for several to stand upon, if they accommodated themselves to its shape. It was thrice as long as it was broad, the swift-flowing water parting on its prow-like upper point and rolling along with a ripple, showing how deep the rock reached below the surface and how difficult it would be for a weak woman to secure a foothold.

But it seemed her sole chance, half-strangled as she had been by that unexpected plunge, and calling her utmost powers into play, Imo headed across the current, hoping to gain a foothold

there if only to gather strength for a further battle with the waters.

Fortunately her strength was sufficient, backed by her slender knowledge of swimming, and she struck fairly against the upper point of the rock, letting the current carry her lower limbs around until they touched the smooth-worn side of the boulder. Then, by a vigorous effort, she fairly rolled out of the water onto the rock.

Easy as the feat might have looked to the eye, it about exhausted her powers, and for a few minutes Imo lay pantingly along the cold rock, her eyes closed, her brain dizzy, her breath coming hot and quick.

But this soon passed, and she rose to her knees, wringing the water from her loosened hair, with a woman-like glance around in quest of her hat, now doubtless lying at the bottom of the pool above, an object of curiosity for the fishes.

"It might have been worse, I suppose," with a faint laugh as she rose to her feet, glancing down at her drenched garments while twisting up her hair. "If this was either shore, I'd laugh more heartily, though!"

A shade of anxiety came into her eyes as she glanced from the forbidding banks to the sky above, already tinged with the bright hues of sunset. It would soon grow dark. And then—

Now that her feet were on firm rock, she shivered with dread at the mere thought of entering the river again, this time voluntarily.

"If it was earlier—if I had more time to brace up my mind—it wouldn't seem nearly so terrible!" she muttered, with a nervous little laugh at the shiver that ran over her frame: not caused by cold, for at that season of the year little harm was to be apprehended from that source.

She knew how seldom that trail was used, for it could hardly be called a road, though the ford was the main one for several miles in either direction. And then, even should one or more people pass that way, she could not see them nor they her, since the ford lay around that abrupt bend in the river bed.

"It's either a night on this bare rock, or a fight with the current for the landing below," she frowned, her fair brows wrinkling as she summed up the difficulties of her situation. "It would be an endless nightmare here, but—it might be failure down there!"

Her cheeks grew even paler at the thought, for right well she realized what such a failure meant; death by drowning.

"And my sacred vow unkept!"

She sunk down in a damp heap, covering her eyes with trembling hands as that thought flashed across her mind.

Death itself might not be so awful; she had learnt during these past months that one sort of living is even worse than the most bitter death; but to die and leave the black-hearted murderer of her father alive to laugh over his dastardly crime.

The shrill neigh of a horse drove those ugly thoughts from her mind, and she sprung to her feet with a short cry, to catch sight of an equine head and breast poised above the high bank on her left. And for the first time in her life the sight of poor Dandy caused her bitter disappointment—for Dandy it was whimpering, pawing, fidgeting about on the very brink as though strongly tempted to take the leap that would at least bring him nearer his loved mistress.

"Back, Dandy!" cried Imo, forgetting herself in her fear for the loving creature. "Back—go home, Dandy! Go home and bring me help!"

She laughed at her own words the instant they passed her lips, for smart as Dandy undoubtedly was, she could hardly expect him to understand and carry out her orders without a more definite clew than she could just then give him.

But as Dandy wheeled and dashed away up the bank, vanishing from her sight at full speed, hope leaped up anew in her bosom. Why not? It would be scarcely more intelligent than some of his exploits already on record.

That hope was short-lived, for a few moments later Dandy showed himself on the other bank, having crossed the river at the ford and raced down there in his pitiful eagerness to help his mistress.

Still clinging to that vague hope, Imo repeated her orders, more distinctly, more sharply than before. Only to finally abandon it when Dandy came back to the point where he had first showed himself.

The red glow was spreading to the zenith, and Imo knew that the sun had already set. She knew, too, that unless help came right speedily she must pass the night on that bare rock, or else risk all on the desperate chance of gaining the narrow landing below.

She knew that her voice could reach but little beyond those high banks, but perhaps the explosion of her revolver might carry further. It was a slender chance, but the only one remaining, the only possible means of calling strong arms to her aid.

The weapon was loaded with metallic cartridges, and of course had snuffed no harm from her unpremeditated bath, and the neat tool promptly responded to her trained fingers, each shot ringing out clear and distinct above the

roaring of the swift waters, seeming doubly loud to her ears, low down between the precipitous banks.

Although acting on the impulse of the moment, Imo Thorpe could hardly have timed her firing better, for though she knew it not, keen eyes were even then curiously fixed upon the riderless horse as it stood outlined against the red glow of sunset.

Even as the first shot was fired, the horseman was turning in that direction, his big blue eyes glowing with increasing interest as Dandy wheeled to trot a little ways up the river, thus bringing his profile clearly against the sky-line.

"A saddle—side-saddle, too!" muttered Lee Chandler, pricking his steed with the rowels as he slackened the reins a bit. "Is it—if it only might be!"

He fancied he could recognize the animal, even at that long distance, and the thought or hope if it might be called such, leaped involuntarily to his lips, to die out as his red lips blanched.

"Gods! if harm has befallen her!"

The keen rowels sought flesh again, but this time to prick so deeply that they won a red stain, and with a snort of pain his good horse leaped forward at full speed, only stopping short on the very brink of the river under that steel-like grip on the powerful curb; so close to the escarpment that bits of dry earth were cast fairly into the swift flowing waters below.

"Miss Thorpe—Imo!" sharply cried the horseman, leaping from the saddle and bending recklessly over the verge as his eyes fell upon that drenched figure below. "Heavens of love! how came you there?"

"By water, Mr. Chandler," came the crisp reply as their eyes met across the space between. "I'm all right, though, if you will kindly ride to the ranch and tell Cousin Will where I'm awaiting his coming."

Her speech was deliberate, far too cool and steady to suit the hot fancy of the man who was listening to them, for they told him only too clearly how little she relished the idea of being placed under such an obligation to him, of all living men.

A swift frown shot across his blonde, handsome face, but before even those clear, keen eyes could trace its meaning, it faded into nothingness. And he sure his own voice betrayed him not.

"And leave you to suffer through all those minutes, Miss Thorpe?" he cried, a sad reproach tinged his voice. "I'm bad enough, heaven knows, but I'm not so cruel as that—least of all toward you!"

"You can serve me best so, Mr. Chandler," her voice colder than before. "Go tell uncle and cousin. They will make arrangements to get me out of this ridiculous fix. And I'd rather be obliged to my own kindred, if you please."

Lee Chandler leaped into his saddle, but it was only to gallop swiftly down river, drawing rein as he came to the point which Imo had so often seen in imagination since first striking that rock. And after a close scrutiny, he turned and rode back to his former position.

"It can be done, Miss Thorpe, if you will only trust to me," he said, speaking slowly and distinctly that she might not lose a word.

"I'd cut off my good right hand rather than disobey or displease you more than I have already done; but I'd be lower, more contemptible than even you think me now were I to ride away and leave you to suffer there alone with night fast coming on. You must permit me to save you—if not—well, there's room in the river for two!"

Imo frowned, her white teeth sharply biting her red lips, for she hated the bare idea of falling under so serious an obligation to this man whom she had, time and again, refused to love or to marry. But she knew something of his indomitable will when it was fairly roused, and she was too sensible a girl to persist in her wish after such words.

"If you insist—so be it, sir," she cried, coldly. "Tell me what I am expected to do, please."

"Nothing but wait for my coming," quickly cried Chandler, his pale face lighting up with a sudden glow. "Stand close to the further edge of the rock, and yield yourself wholly to me. I'll save you or die in the attempt!"

"You mean to swim your horse down this way, then?"

"Yes. It will be easier for you, dear Miss Imo," replied Chandler, not stopping for more, but wheeling his steed and riding rapidly up toward the ford.

"It's a dose bitterer than wormwood to the dainty lass!" he muttered barely above his breath, his strong jaws squaring with the thought. "She'd almost as soon see the devil coming to her aid, but it'll be a slight hold—and I need all I can get!"

That reflection was about as bitter a dose as he had ever known, but Lee Chandler was frank and open enough—with himself!

He knew there was a spice of peril in the attempt which he was about to make, especially now that the twilight was deepening and growing almost dark along the river as it rushed be-

tween its high banks. But he knew, too, that he meant to magnify that peril as much as possible in the eyes of the maiden whom he had, times almost without number, sworn to make his loving bride.

"If it had been Rex Pollard, now—curse him!" came viciously through his grating teeth. "Dollars to cents she'd be hot to try it all over again, just for the excuse it would give him to clip her dainty waist!"

Such thoughts as these in the majority of lovers would have gone far toward unfitting them for the really difficult task which lay before the prince of Round-up City, but they only served to steady the nerves of Lee Chandler and insure his ultimate success. To fail, even to boggle, would only bring him into greater and less favorable contrast with Rex Pollard in the mind of the maiden they both loved.

Reaching the ford, Lee Chandler quickly made his preparations for the feat, then with voice, bit and spur he urged his horse to take the leap from the rock ledge into the deep pool below.

As soon as the horse rose above the surface, Chandler slipped from the saddle and supported himself behind it, guiding the animal down the middle of the river, bound to the rescue of the maiden he coveted.

CHAPTER V.

"PAY DOWN, OR GO UP!"

Tick Slater's yellow tushes gave an ugly sound as they whetted together after asking that blunt question, and their owner leaned forward the more readily to note how it was received by the helplessly bound ranchero.

Much as a sensitive man might receive a cruel slap in the face when powerless to resent or return the blow: with a shiver, a shrinking back and a gasping sound that was almost a moan.

Where he would not have flinched from death if offered, Rex Pollard did shrink from those words, containing such a foul insinuation.

"Kinder fetches ye on the raw, don't it, pardner?" chuckled the red-headed ruffian, cocking his eyes with a half squint through the smoke curling upward from his pipe. "Sorter fetches back the mem'ry o' that night back yen', when they was enough done fer to clean up ot all Rack-about Range fer a month o' Sundays?"

"You devil!" panted Pollard, hoarsely, his eyes flashing brighter than the little fire beyond.

"I'll give you the Shuttlecock for just two minutes liberty—just two minutes!"

Tick Slater clicked his tushes in a broadening grin.

"Ginerous, too mighty much, pardner, an' I ain't sech a durned hog as to ketch ye up on a crazy offer that you'd be in a heap hurry to 'pent over ef I was to did. All the same, I'm grinnin' wide open fer to see ye in sech a notion fer tradin'—I jest be, now!"

"It's what I fetched ye hyar fer, an' the sooner we kin come to a trade the quicker you'll hev time fer to git to the chuck-board at the ole Shuttlecock. So—which is it to be, boss: pay down, or go up?"

Though the struggle was a hard one, Rex Pollard managed to regain his self-control during that deliberate speech, and outwardly he showed no signs of the terrible fire which was consuming him inwardly.

"I don't understand what you're trying to get through you, Slater," he said, slowly.

"Lyin's ketchin', ain't it?" grinned the gaunt rascal, insolently. "But I ain't kickin' at that. Sorter makes it feel more fri'ndly like atwixt a feller an' you, an' limbers up the tongue o' me."

"Will you come to the point?"

"Ef ye don't hurry me up too mighty much," nodded Slater, using the tip of his little finger as a tobacco-stopper. "It's a monstrous delicate matter, fetchin' up sech a p'int as this, an' ef you skeer me off the straight trail a-flappin' the red o' yer tongue too orful loud, they ain't no tellin' whar the stampede won't bring up—no sir!"

The ranchero clicked his jaws together, doggedly waiting for his captor to finish. Every sentence had a barb such as only a man in his peculiar situation could fully appreciate, but this vile rascal should have as little cause for triumph as mortal man could give him.

"Bites, don't it?" maliciously laughed Slater. "Never thought ye'd fall so low as to hev a hog thief crowin' over ye?"

Pollard closed his eyes, his head resting against the tree-trunk.

"Comes funny, but things will work that way in a wooden country, ye know, pardner. Reckon you never thought to 'member that when you rubbed so much pepper in them stripes 'cross the back o' me?"

"I'll agree to duplicate the pattern before you're a week older, Tick Slater!"

"I'll be thar while you're doin' of it, reckon, pardner," with a careless nod as he emptied the ashes from his pipe and set about replenishing it. "But they's time fer mighty heap o' things to happen inside o' even one weenty week. An' one o' them mought-be's 'pends on what you say an' agree to this very night, Polly, my lad."

"Wake me up when you're ready to come to the point, rascal."

"Don't you git skeered that I won't hev ye all eyes open," chuckled the "speculator," screwing

around on his heels to secure a light for his pipe, pausing to drop a few dry sticks on the bed of coals to keep up the glow. "Not that it'll be sech a mighty s'prise to ye, but they's some sort o' things we cain't never git plum easy over; an' ef this ain't one o' them which, I'm a liar from 'way back yen'!"

Pollard said nothing, his eyes remaining closed, his face showing strangely white in the glow of the fire as his head leaned back against the rough bark of the tree.

"I've bin mighty patient, pardner, an' you'd know I was lyin' ef I tried to make it out any other way. I've held my hush now purty nigh a clean year, an' a man'd be a hog to ax fer any longer grace. So—when be I to git my honest whack out o' that Bailey Thorpe killin'?"

"Can you swear that you haven't it already?" flashed Pollard, his lids flying open, his head coming forward to rivet a pair of glowing eyes upon the face of his captor. "Can you even make oath that you didn't get the whole of it?"

Tick Slater lifted his left hand, working its thumb back and forth until the joint snapped audibly.

"Fetch on your books, pardner, ef it's oath-takin' you're so mighty hungry fer! An' thar won't be no thumb-kissin', nuther!"

"Let it go. You've graduated in the art of perjury."

"Ef I've told lies at odd spells, they's other times when I've swallered the plain truth, as you'd ort fer to know, Polly," with a grim nod.

"Fer instance: nobody ever hearn me let out a whimper while all Rack-about Range was goin' wild over the findin' o' Bailey Thorpe. An' yit—Waal, pardner, ef I do say it with my own tongue, I don't reckon they's but one human critter livin' this day that kin tell more 'bout how the ole man come-ye-so then Tick Slater—no less!"

"Who helped you butcher the poor old gentleman, then?" harshly demanded Pollard.

"Never hed a finger—nur thumb—in the pie, so help me!"

"Then why didn't you come forward and tell all you knew? If you haven't hatched it all up since then!"

"Mebbe beca'se the back o' me was too mighty raw fer to stan' the like o' rubbin' down I'd 'a' sketched from the crowd," grinned the fellow, shrugging his shoulders as though even the remembrance stung him uncomfortably.

"Mebbe beca'se I reckoned they'd string you up anyhow, fer I didn't know so much about halibis then as I do now. I come mighty nigh kickin' all the hide off when I see how it turned out, but a lickin' don't last long, an' now I'm hungrier fer my divvy then I be fer revenge."

"If it's money you want, pin that dastardly crime to the right man and I'll give you every dollar I'm worth in this world."

"Tired o' livin' so quick?" gasped Slater, his eyes and mouth wide open. "Waal, that's the fu'st time I ever—but you're coddin'! It won't work that way, pardner," settling down into his former easy attitude, "an' to show ye how mighty foolish it'd be in ye fer to try to make me think one critter was 'nother—let me tell ye somethin'."

"Leven months ago, more or less to a day or so, which don't matter none to speak of, they was a man turned up missin' over night. He come home the next day, but it wasn't on his own hoofs, nur he hedn't a word to say in pickin' out the way nur the gait. Hellow! ain't settin' onto a sharp bump nur nothin', pardner?"

Slater grinned maliciously as he saw Pollard shiver like one undergoing torture, but not a sound escaped his close-locked jaws.

"That man was Bailey Thorpe, of the Diamond Cross. They was a hole in his throat mighty nigh big enough to kick a dog through. He was cold when they found him, an' dreaned mighty dry I reckon, from all tellin'. Fer I couldn't see so mighty cl'ar that night, though the moon an' stars was shinin' 'bout as bright as I ever see e'm afore or sence."

Pollard gave a sudden start at those deliberately spoken words, his lids flying open, his eyes glowing strangely as they fixed upon the ugly countenance of his captor.

His lips parted as if to speak, but only a faint gasp, or sigh, came through them.

Tick Slater nodded briskly, his yellow tushes parting in a grin.

"Bet yer sweet life I jest was, pardner!" he nodded, interpreting that sound to suit his own convenience. "Never you mind jest fer why I was out takin' a peramble on my own hook. Mebbe I was lookin' fer a stray hog. Mebbe it was to let the cool air smooth down the back you ruffled up so p'izenly. Mebbe it was this, that, t'other. Anyway, I was out that night."

"Shell I tell you jest what I see that night, Polly?"

"Tell the plain truth, and name your own price, Tick Slater."

"Cash in hand, ahead o' the tellin'?"

"So you can swap the truth for a lie? Name your figures and I'll agree to meet them the hour Bailey Thorpe's murderer is convicted of that dastardly crime!"

"Through your will, mebbe?" laughed Slater, shaking his head. "Ef you can't rig a better purchase then that, pard, no tradee."

Pollard sunk back into his former position with a sudden loss of his eager interest. Knowing the fellow as he did, he seemingly gave up all hope of learning the truth.

"You play it down mighty fine, Polly, but I'm too mighty bobtail fer your salt to stick—yes, I be now! Talk is cheap, but money talks business. Money I want bad, but ef I cain't git money I kin git pay fer a scorched back in 'nother way, please chance! Fer it was clean chance that set me to stretchin' the two legs o' me that same night."

"I'm lettin' out heap more to ye, pardner, then any other man-critter could ketch through my teeth, fer I ain't a bit skeered that you'll ever haul me up afore jedge and jury fer to tell my little story—no I ain't, now!"

"Beca'se why? Beca'se o' the red prent that was found onto the bald-faced shirt Bailey Thorpe wored that night. Beca'se o' the four fingers an' the pa'm an' the no-thumb that told all who looked how a man that'd lost the thumb from his left hand hed done the killin'!"

A harsh sound, that might have been an oath, burst from the lips of the captive ranchman, and his eyes fairly blazed as they met the cunning, half-cowardly gaze of his captor.

"All the same, pardner, I see the hull job from start to finish, an' though they was heap o' skeer in the heart o' me, I hed eyes sharp a-plenty fer to take note o' that same hand—the hand which I don't know of but one o' the like in all Rack-about Range."

"You mean my poor hand, Tick Slater?" slowly demanded Pollard.

"I mean a left hand. I mean a hand that hain't got no thumb onto it. I mean the hand that pressed the pore ole man down as he lay kickin' on the ground, his life pumpin' out at his throat in big rivers. I mean the hand that left its prent onto thet stiff white shirt."

"It is a lie, foul as hell itself!" panted Pollard.

"Mebbe you'd better call it a dream, pardner," affably nodded the ruffian, his yellow tushes protruding worse than ever. "A dream is heap easier to fergit then a lie. An' speakin' o' fergittin', ain't it wuth a good divvy fer sech a critter as me to fergit all that an' all which folered after? Eh? Don't you reckon, Polly?"

"What do you mean by that, you villain?" panted the ranchero.

"Waal, you do ax fer the most chinnin' of any man I ever met up with!" frowned Slater, moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Ef I wasn't so dead sure o' the cinch I've got onto ye I'd be mighty ready fer to think mebbe I'd jest tuck a tramp in my sleep an' dreamed the hull rigmarole—so I jest would now!"

"Do you mean to hint—"

"Devil a hint in the hull thing, pardner. It's plain talk with all the bark on. An' ef you don't come to Limerick with a healthy ole divvy, I'll blow the gaff so loud that all Rack-about Range 'll echo from center to circumference with the howl Bailey Thorpe come by his death—so thar, now!"

"You dare—I'll kill you for that, Tick Slater, unless you murder me!" hoarsely panted Pollard, struggling savagely with his bonds.

"Hangin' ain't murder, an' ef you throw away this chaine, I'll fit a mighty snug collar 'round that neck o' yours ef it takes—"

"Dollars to cents I can show a better one of samples for half the money!" cried a clear, mellow voice from out the shadows.

CHAPTER VI.

GRIP-SACK SID, THE SAMPLE SPORT.

FOR a single breath Tick Slater remained as if spellbound by that sudden interruption, but then, with a howl of terror as he cast a swift glance over his shoulder in the direction from whence those words came, he leaped to his feet, bounding over the little fire as though he could only see safety in headlong flight.

His foot caught on a stub, and he fell headlong with a howl of angry fright, the heavy shock apparently knocking the senses out of him in company with his breath.

"Hold on, partner!" came that clear voice again as its owner broke cover and sprung into the little opening. "Can't let you run off like that without even a single glance at my samples of neckwear; no, sir! Such a slur on the profession would—Steady, you!"

With a grating oath Tick Slater whirled over into a sitting posture, dashing the dust and leaves from his face with one hand even as the other fumbled for a revolver at his middle.

But swift as was his action, those of the new-comer more than matched them, and with a single leap and a deft kick, the pistol was knocked from his hand, flying into the bushes without exploding.

"You're too clumsy by half, Tick Slater," laughed the new-comer, as the ruffian gave a muffled howl of pain as his hand dropped benumbed. "First you know you'll be plugging somebody with those guns, and that'd be just awful—for you!"

"You ain't—Who be ye, anyway?" spluttered the rascal, shaking his head and batting his eyes rapidly as though to clear his vision.

"A drummer, with the neatest, choicest,

most select line of samples any one man ever toted in a grip for— Now, Tick Slater, for shame!"

The red glow of the fire was reflected back from the nickel-plated frame of a Smith & Wesson, and as the muzzle covered the ruffian, a laughing pair of keen gray eyes looked over the barrel into the flushed face of his target.

Slater had scrambled to his feet, trying to draw a second pistol with his sound left hand, but the weapon stuck in its scabbard for an instant, and there it was suffered to remain, for Tick knew he was "lined" by one who could and would shoot if crowded.

"It's mighty mean manners to interrupt a gentleman when he's talking white, Tick Slater," purred the cool stranger, smiling even more blandly than at first. "I don't want to begin my record in Rack-about Range by starting a private cemetery, but— Will you elevate that left duke of yours?"

"Don't trust him—cripple the cur!" panted Pollard, just catching his breath after this unexpected irruption.

"Never have aught to do with damaged samples when I can just as well carry a line that's perfect, thank you," politely nodded the newcomer, but without removing his gaze from the rascal at bay. "Tick Slater, will you open your ears a bit?"

"Devil toast ye! who set you up to—"

"Chip in?" was the laughing interruption. "Well, it's the way I was built maybe. I heard you talking of collars, and as it's dollars to cents I can discount you in prices as well as quality, I had to chip."

All this time Tick Slater was trying to take the measure of the audacious fellow who had dared to snatch the bone from between his very jaws, and the summing up was far from satisfactory.

He saw an athletic figure, neatly dressed in a business suit, with derby hat rakishly cocked over a close crop of brown hair. He saw a smooth-shorn face, strong rather than handsome, though the features were fairly regular in themselves. He saw a strong chin and rather wide mouth, a little exaggerated just now by the broad smile which curled the full, red lips. And more than any other particular feature, he took note of those deep-set gray eyes; not large, but strangely keen and full of fire just then!

A leather strap crossed the stranger's right shoulder, meeting and supporting a russet-leather grip-sack at his left hip, the silver mountings of which shone brightly in the firelight.

The gray trousers were tucked into riding-boots of fine leather, with spurs screwed into each heel, plainly proclaiming the horseman.

"And when I do chip, Tick, it's fight along that line until I break or go bust myself. So—uncramp those digits of yours, please?"

A flash of those keen gray eyes pointed the request, and with a long breath that told how savage burned the hatred within his bosom, Slater released his weapon and slowly lifted his hands above his head.

"You hain't got no right—"

"Save that of might, backed by a drop as neat as you ever met up with, partner," lightly nodded the stranger. "In a new territory, you know, and got to make a record. Got to, you sabe, even if I make it by cutting under a brother professional in the same line. And that makes me think—what is your line, anyway, Tick?"

"A line of hemp, with a snug noose at the end!" flashed Pollard. "Cut me loose, sir, and I'll see that he reaches the end of that line, too, the cur!"

"Thanks," with a side nod. "Hope to know you better after a bit, stranger, but it's a rule of mine never to let up on a customer I've tackled until I've sold him a long bill or proved him n. g. So—my dear Slater do you have faith that I've fed this gun since firing it?"

Only a sulky, inarticulate growl, but those bleared eyes were keenly watching for slip or trip through which he might recover his lost ground.

"And you can see for yourself that I know which end is the most dangerous when pointed straight," smiled the stranger sport, his tones as soft as those of a purring panther. "So, Tick, when I say unto you take a lay-down in time to save a tumble-down, you'll have good sense enough to do it?"

"Let up, can't ye, durn it?" snarled the defeated blackmailer.

"Durn it goes, to please you, Tick," nodded the sport, "but that's the limit just at present. Fact is, I want to know a little more about this new-fashioned game. I'm always open for a spec., and who knows but what I've found a bonanza right now and right here?"

Tick Slater gave an involuntary start as the crackling of a dry twig came to his ears. Was his chance coming, after all?

"Just my nag, Slater," nodded the stranger. "He's wild and woolly but I won't let him bite you if you play meek and lowly. Shall I spread you out to dry, you slow-moving critter?"

In sharp contrast to his suave speech came that question, and Tick Slater shivered anew as he caught that sudden glow from those eyes. It meant a pistol-shot if he remained stubborn,

and with a snarling curse at his crooked luck, he lay down flat on his face.

"Good enough, Slater," nodded the sport, stepping forward and taking a roll of stout cord from his grip-sack as he continued: "I'll make a trained porker out of you yet, if you only keep to the beaten track. That's a line I've never taken up as yet, but with you for a sample I'd be sure to build up a great trade—yes, sir!"

His fingers were to the full as nimble as his tongue, and the cord was deftly knotted about the rascal's ankles, then returned to the grip-sack to be exchanged for a polished pair of handcuffs.

"Another one of my samples, Tick," purred the stranger as he drew both hands down and behind their owner, snapping the irons in place. "I've got others in my big grip, so I can spare you these. On condition that you tell where you got them, and add that I'm selling 'way down below water-mark. Bound to build up a trade if it shipwrecks the house at home—bound to!"

Retreating a pace and bringing Slater with him by a grip on his collar, the stranger jerked his captive to a sitting posture, placing the two men face to face and only a few feet apart.

"Now set me free, sir, and name your own price for this favor," the ranchero said, forcing himself to speak calmly.

"Do it in a holy second, stranger, if I was only a bit better acquainted," slowly responded the other, thoughtfully rubbing his square chin as his gaze roved from face to face, seemingly in the effort to read what lay beneath the surface. "But—well, you see, I only heard part of the talk while over yonder, and—our genial Tick was slinging some mighty tough samples at your head, you remember?"

"All lies, foul as the brain that studied them up and tongue that lent them utterance!" flashed the ranch-owner.

"Every word gospel truth an' I'm ready fer to back 'em up ef you only jest tote us to Round-up!" eagerly cried Slater, catching at this hope, knowing how little mercy he had to expect from the hands of Rex Pollard should that enemy once win free. "He butchered ole Thorpe an' I see'd him do it with the own two eyes o' me!"

"To night—last night—when?" curtly demanded the stranger.

"More than eleven months ago, sir," and Pollard still kept his hot passions in check. "Others than that cur tried to fasten the crime on my head, but I plainly proved my innocence."

"By hirin' men to swar to a lyin' halibi!" persisted Slater. "I tell you I see the hull a'fa'r with my own lookin' eyes!"

"And so bore evidence at the inquest, of course?"

"I—I didn't dast to—then!" mumbled the rascal, his bleared eyes sinking before that keen gaze. "The gang was so bloody hot they'd 'a' lynched me 'long o' that devil!"

"And it takes eleven full months for hot blood to cool down in this region? Begin to think I've made a mistake—ought to have brought along a few samples of ice!" smiled the stranger, his keen eyes busy, his fingers rasping his smooth shaven chin the while.

"Do as he says, sir, and take us both to town. I'll risk even his vile lies for a chance to have him pinched hard enough to tell the whole truth of what he saw—if he saw anything! I begin to believe there is a more cunning hand back of all this! You cur! didn't Lee Chandler hire you to catch and pinch me after this fashion?"

"No, he never," was the sulky retort. "All I wanted was to git a fa'r divvy out o' what you made by killin' ole Thorpe, but now I'll be mighty nigh satisfied ef I kin see you pull hemp—double durn ye!"

"I'll see you hang—if I can keep from tearing your black heart out with my bare fingers!" raged Pollard, his tempestuous passions overcoming his resolution, and with savage strength he wrestled with his bonds.

So desperate were his efforts that Tick Slater began to doubt the power of his own chosen bonds, and he shrunk away as far as possible, whiningly asking protection from his captor.

"He'll butcher me ef he ketches a loose, an' that'd make two bloody murders!"

Pollard abruptly ceased his vain struggles, forcing himself to a fictitious calmness as he met that steady, curious gaze.

"Look at his face, then into mine, sir. Judge which is the more honest, the easiest to believe and put faith in. All I ask of you is cool, impartial reasoning."

"And right there you hit me where I'm proud to live," nodded the stranger with a frank smile. "Of all the samples I carry, cool reason is my proudest boast. And to begin on a common footing, since I have already learned your names and stations through my ears, I'll save a card—they're in my other grip, by the way—by naming myself."

"Gentlemen, yours to command, Sidney Harper. Better known on the road, perhaps, as Grip-sack Sid, the Sample Sport. Proud to make your acquaintance, both, and would give each a cordial grip o' the hand if—well, I'm as cheeky as they make 'em, I reckon, but it

would be playing it rather low down to expect you to shake with flippers in limbo!"

"You are a gentleman, of course, Mr. Harper?"

"I'm a member of the Travelers, and that's better than a title."

"Then prove yourself one worthy such an election by setting my limbs at liberty!" flashed the ranchero, sternly.

"Don't ye—don't ye go fer to do it unless ye give me a fa'r start ahead o' the p'izen critter!" anxiously spluttered Slater, turning as pale as his coating of tan and dirt would permit.

Grip-sack Sid gazed thoughtfully from face to face.

CHAPTER VII.

A NEATLY-MANAGED RESCUE.

Now that he was fairly on a level with the river, Lee Chandler found it much lighter there between those high banks than he had thought it from the higher regions.

"Light enough, and time in abundance, old fellow," he muttered, more to himself than to his vigorously swimming steed, though at the same time he gently twitched the bridle, not as a signal for greater exertions, but to steady the animal a bit.

He was thoroughly well acquainted with the river, thanks to his passion for angling, and his hasty look down the stream had been more to gain a few moments for reflection, and as a blind, than through any particular necessity of refreshing his memory.

As the current carried them around the bend, his keen eyes quickly discovered the trim figure of the maiden, standing close to the edge of the pointed rock, as directed, awaiting his coming. He could see that she was watching up-stream, though he could not make out her features with distinctness, and he encouragingly waved a hand upward.

"She'll take it like a dose of medicine, worse luck!" grated from his lips as he deftly formed a knot in the bridle-reins to guard against their hanging low enough to be caught by the knees of the swimming horse.

That was the touch of aloes in his draught, rendered all the more bitter by his fierce, nearly hopeless love.

There was little space for such reflections, however, and as the rapid current aided the good horse down-stream, Lee Chandler gave his mind over to completing the rescue he had so boldly pledged himself to perfect.

A touch of the rein turned the head of his horse a trifle across the current, barely enough to take him close alongside the rock on top of which Imo Thorpe stood in waiting.

"Steady, old fellow," with a warning mutter as he marked out his course. "No bottom alongside. And if you hit that point with full steam on—well, you'll be a mighty leaky vessel to support such a dainty lot of precious freight. Steady, boy!"

With a snort that sent a sparkle of spray from before its dilating nostrils, the good steed swam onward, though with ears sharply pricked toward that slender figure on the rock ahead.

"Shy, and I'll cut you into *charqui*!" viciously breathed Chandler, as he noted this, quickly gripping the loop of the reins with his left hand, for he knew that a single miscalculation on the part of either horse or rider would end in discomfiture, if no worse.

Now that he had something by which to measure the speed with which he was traveling, the force of the current, aided by the vigorous limbs of the horse, he could see that the exploit was not so very simple, after all.

To strike that prow-like rock while under such headway could hardly fail to cripple his mount, when he would have to swim for his own life, without taking into thought that precious charge yonder. And should the animal shy off at or just before the critical instant, Imo might be missed or hurled into the water.

"Ready, Imo!" he cried, clearly, waving his free right hand. "I'll have to snatch you as we sweep by, but trust to me—I'll die before failing you, darling!"

He knew he was running a risk in using such terms, but he knew, too, that Imo would hardly have time to resent his familiarity, and he believed that very daring would help to impress her with the peril he was incurring on her account. Surely he would never dare so much unless greatly excited and tensely nerved.

Another touch of the reins held the good steed steady and forced him past the point of the rock so closely that Chandler felt his leg scrape against the edge, even as his strong right arm flew out to clasp the maiden about the waist, sweeping her swiftly, surely from her footing to the saddle which he had so recently vacated.

With a wild snort of terror the horse sunk below the surface, and Imo gave an involuntary cry as she seemed to be sinking into the river without support, but Chandler cried out sharply:

"Steady—for your life, darling!"

The head of the horse broke the surface, blowing the water into spray before its dilating nostrils, and before it could sink again, Lee Chandler added:

"Grip the pommel, Imo! Steady—so!"

As he felt that she was obeying, Chandler slackened his almost fierce grip about her waist, and let himself slip from the rump of the overburdened animal, just as its struggling head was sinking out of sight for the second time.

This relief was timely, and with a violent plunge that caused the maiden to close her eyes and tightly cling to the floating mane, he rose higher in the water, swimming with greater freedom.

"Good as new wheat!" cried Chandler, with a short laugh, as he drew himself closer to the girl, floating alongside with his right arm resting over the cantle of his saddle. "All's done now save crowing, Miss Imo, and I'll give an extra peal for your cool grit and steady nerves!"

"Yours, rather, Mr. Chandler. I have done nothing—"

"Save obey, and trust yourself to me," hastily added the man, pulling himself further along so that he could look up into her pale face. "If you might always yield so gracefully!"

"Don't make me wholly regret your coming, Mr. Chandler!" flashed the maiden, shrinking visibly from his ardent gaze. "I could have saved myself by swimming—it is not yet too late if—if you—"

"For Heaven's sake, don't!" cried Chandler, as she made a move to abandon the saddle. "He'd catch his hoofs in your habit and beat you down to death!"

"Is it a truce between us, then?"

"Yes—anything—until your dear life is out of danger," he swiftly replied. "Forgive me—I was mad to even think—"

"Say no more, please. Yonder is the landing place, isn't it?"

Imo asked the question with a great sigh of relief, though in the growing gloom she could not make out the point spoken of. Still, it was a break, and that could not be otherwise than welcome to her, just then.

"Not yet," replied Chandler, his fingers knotted through the floating mane of his horse, though he added none of his weight to the burden that generous creature was called upon to bear. "We'll soon be there, though, so please steady yourself in the saddle."

Touching the reins Lee Chandler turned the head of his horse slightly quartering across the current as they drew near to the second bend, for he was perfectly familiar with the course and the gloom was not deep enough to confuse his keen eyes.

Close to the rock wall they swept around the bend, then with an encouraging shout, Chandler swung the horse's head almost at right-angles with the current, here running toward the further shore.

There was a brief, desperate struggle, then the fore-hoofs struck sound bottom. A cheering shout—a fierce fight—then the good steed stood on a narrow shelf but a trifle above the level of the water, panting deeply but with breath enough left to give vent to a low, proud whimper.

"Good boy!" nodded Chandler, patting its dripping neck before turning to lift the maiden from the saddle. "I knew I could bank on your grit, and from this night on you've got the freedom of the oat-bin—bless you, my lad!"

"He deserves all you give him, Mr. Chandler," said Imo, as she permitted him to aid in her descent. "I wish you would sell him."

"He's yours already, if you'll accept him with my good wishes, Imo," quickly cried the man, his eyes glowing as they rested on her fair face. "I'd take out my heart and lay it—"

"I'd have no use for that, and you may keep your horse, sir," came coldly from her lips. "I hardly meant what I said, and I certainly could not permit you to increase the obligation I'm already under by giving away your favorite."

"It's the master you object to, not the horse, Miss Thorpe?"

"Don't—why will you persist?" she cried, averting her face with a shiver. "Why will you force me into saying words that must sound ungrateful? Why can you not accept what—my old answer?"

"Because I'd rather hear you curse me than not to hear your dear voice at all!" flashed Chandler, almost savagely. "Because I'm a fool—because I'm in love with you, which amounts to the same thing."

Imo Thorpe turned away, facing the steep ascent as the shortest method of escaping from an unpleasant situation, but Chandler checked her by a gentle touch on the arm, speaking in changed tones before she could shake his touch off, if such should be her impulse:

"I was mad—I am mad, if you like it that way, Imo Thorpe; but I'll prove to you that I can play the gentleman, even if I have in my madness forfeited all claim to that title."

"You are fatigued and hardly fit to fight your way alone; permit me, please."

With an arm about her waist, clasping her arm at the elbow with gentle firmness, the Prince of Round-up aided her up the really difficult slope, a single sharp word keeping the horse behind them.

Not until then did the maiden fairly realize how severely her bodily powers had been tested, and long before the level above was won, she

knew that, without his aid, she must have failed, if not fallen back to be swept away by the hungry current.

Trembling, dizzy, she stood for a brief space hardly conscious of that firm, masterful embrace, and Lee Chandler was in no great hurry to cut it short. Not until Imo drew away from his side did he drop his arm from about her waist, still holding it ready to lend renewed support should faintness assail her.

"You are too ill to think of riding, Miss Thorpe?" he asked, as he gave his waiting steed the signal to scramble up the rocky slope.

"No. I am well—quite well," was her hasty response, rallying with a perceptible effort. "It was but a momentary dizziness. I thank you for your generous aid, Mr. Chandler, and my relatives will add their gratitude to mine."

"I'm already repaid for all it cost me—steady, boy!" as his horse gained the level, shaking itself so vigorously that a shower of spray flew all about from its dripping equipage. "Isn't that your horse over yonder, Miss Thorpe?"

"Dandy—yes!" now seeming more like her usual self as the eager whimper of the horse came from the further bank. "Don't blame him, for it was more my fault than his."

"I could rather bless him—if I knew that no harm would come to his fair mistress from her adventure," quickly added Chandler, his fierce passion showing itself through his forced composure. "And yet—you must ride my nag, Miss Thorpe," abruptly changing his sentence as Imo turned away in the direction of the ford.

"I can walk, thank you, sir."

"Must I always be punished for what will break guard, Miss Thorpe? At least, do not punish yourself. May I help you into the saddle?"

Softly, almost piteously he spoke, and despite her strong aversion toward him, Imo could not persist in her first determination. In silence she turned and accepted his aid in mounting his horse, and side by side they proceeded along the bank to the ford, his hand resting on the cantle, his face looking very pale and sad in the growing light of the stars and moon above them.

Gaining the head of the slope leading down to the ford, Imo quickly sprang to the ground, before he could raise an objection.

"I meant for you to ride across, Miss Thorpe, but if you prefer it I'll catch and bring Dandy to you here."

For answer Imo slipped a silver whistle from where it hung hidden about her neck by a silken cord, sounding a musical thrill.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CHANGE OF ESCORTS.

THERE came a shrill neigh in answer, and a moment later Dandy was casting the spray high into air as he dashed through the ford, leaping up the slope and dropping to his knees beside his mistress with a joyous whimper which might almost have been an apology for his slip of an hour earlier.

Before Lee Chandler could lend a hand, Imo Thorpe was safely seated in the saddle, and Dandy was erect, trembling with his eagerness to be off now that he once more felt that loved burden.

Chandler laughed shortly, as he patted the arched neck of his own steed, and there was a trace of bitterness in the tones he used to say:

"Poor boy! Perhaps 'tis just as well my offer was declined. She had no room in her heart for you—or for your master, either!"

"I am grateful to both, Mr. Chandler," said Imo, her voice slightly unsteady. "Some day I hope to prove as much, but—"

"But not now, you mean?" laughed the man, vaulting into the saddle, and fixing his ardent gaze upon her pale face. "And never in the only way you can thank me, Imo Thorpe!"

"Good-night, Mr. Chandler," bowed the maiden, turning down the slope to the ford.

"Not yet, Miss Thorpe," he added, keeping close to her side, but riding so as to interpose himself and horse between Dandy and the deep pool. "Brute as you consider me, I'm not ruffian enough to leave you to take so long a ride without an escort."

"You persist in cruelly wronging me, Mr. Chandler," she said, in pained tones. "You force me to utter hard words, and then blame me because this must be so. If you would only accept my gratitude for your services, it would be so much more pleasant—to me, at least."

"If you could only realize how madly I love you—"

"Love?" almost fiercely interrupted the maiden, her tightly clinched right hand uplifting toward the stars. "Love—and I? You dare to prate of love to me, while my martyred father sleeps in his bloody grave unavenged?"

A choking sob burst from her lips as she pricked Dandy with the spur, breaking into a rapid gallop which carried her toward the still distant Diamond Cross Ranch.

Lee Chandler slackened rein, and easily kept pace with her, gloomily watching her pale, grief-drawn face by the moonlight. But then, leaning forward to force her eyes toward him, he quickly uttered:

"Imo Thorpe, if I should prove to be the

means of avenging your foully murdered father, would you listen to my words of love, then? If I come to you with the assassin's death-warrant in my hand, will you swear to accept them both?"

For a single breath their eyes met, then hers faltered, lowered, turned away from those glowing orbs.

And when she spoke, her voice was low and unsteady:

"Bring the guilty demon to the gallows back yonder, Mr. Chandler, and anything you ask of me—"

"Anything, Imo?"

"Anything save my love or my hand."

Lee Chandler drew erect, laughing harshly.

"Anything but the one thing which I can ask of you, of course! You are truly generous, Imo Thorpe!"

"I am truthful, and that is better, sir," proudly facing him. "I refused your love when all was bright and happy. I refuse it now, when the clouds show dark and hideous. And if poor father is only to be avenged through such means, I'll share his grave with him and beg his forgiveness across the river!"

Again she touched Dandy with the spur, but even as the good steed sprang forward, Chandler gripped her reins and checked both horses by his great muscle.

"Look!" as he gazed ahead to where, dimly outlined against the sky, a single horseman might be seen. "He may be off-color, and—"

"He is but one, and my revolver is still serviceable," coldly uttered Imo, shaking her bridle to remove his grasp.

"There may be others at his back, though, and until you are in perfect safety at home, Miss Thorpe, I hold myself responsible. Permit me to ride on ahead and question the fellow."

He released her rein, to look to his pistols, grimly, adding:

"I'll stand good for a full dozen, anyway, and there can hardly be more of the gang than that."

"Put up your guns, Mr. Chandler," coldly cried Imo, as she rode forward at a pace. "I recognize him, and can vouch for his honesty. It is Rule Keeler, father's old herder."

"But now head man on the Shuttlescock!" flashed Chandler, his handsome face turning dark and forbidding.

"Yet still my friend, bear in mind, sir," bowed Imo, touching up Dandy and waving a hand toward the horseman, who also drew rein at sight of equestrians ahead.

A waving hat declared that the rider whom Imo named as Rule Keeler accepted the friendly signal, but Lee Chandler sent his steed swiftly ahead of the maiden, still gripping a revolver in his right hand.

If he meditated violence, the maiden followed him too closely for him to have a fair chance, but the kindest supposition is that he wished to make sure that the horseman was indeed a friend before risking the woman he loved in his company.

"Welcome, Papa Keeler!" cried Imo, her voice ringing out cheerily, almost gleefully at the meeting. "You're not too busy to act as my escort home, I trust?"

"I wouldn't be ef I was clean dyin', Miss Imy," bowed the old man as his deep-lined face broke into a smile.

"Then consider yourself elected, Papa Rule!"

"And I, Miss Thorpe?"

"Are relieved of duty until—can you call at the home to-morrow, Mr. Chandler?"

"If there be any pressing necessity—yes," with a cold bow.

"Please oblige me, then," her voice growing softer as she extended her hand with a little shyness. "I can express my thanks in better shape, then, I hope. You will come?"

"Through fire and brimstone at your wish, Miss Thorpe!" he passionately breathed, gripping her hand firmly and bending over until it met his hot lips.

"I shall expect you, then. Now, Daddy Rule—homeward bound!"

Lee Chandler sat his horse, watching the twain as they rode away at a hard gallop. And a peculiar smile curled his full red lips as he muttered:

"Ay! I'll come, my dainty darling! And I'll keep coming until I've won what I come for—bet your precious life on that!"

And he was still sitting thus when Imo tightened rein and turned chin on shoulder to glance backward.

"A mighty smooth tongue an' a handsome face, Miss Imy," slowly observed Rule Keeler. "Ef a body could on'y be sart'in they was all to match, abind 'em!"

"You don't love him, Daddy Rule?" smiled the maiden.

"No better than I hope you do, Miss Imy," hesitating a moment before adding the words: "An' ef that's it, your likin' fer him won't set other hearts to achin' sore, little lady!"

"Could a fawn love a tiger, Daddy?"

"I'm hopin' not, Miss Imy."

"I'm hardly a fawn, perhaps, but somehow Lee Chandler always reminds me of a hungry tiger, and— But let him go, swallowed up by the night, Daddy Rule, and tell me: I'm not taking you too much out of your way?"

"I was ridin' over to the ranch, Miss Imy, hopin' to ketch a bit o' talk with you, but even ef I was on t'other tack, your way'd be mine as long's I could be of sarvice to you. Don't you know that, honey?"

"I do know, Daddy Rule, and only for one thing, I could cry over your deserting the Diamond Cross colors."

"An' kin I guess what that one thing is, little lady?"

"You might—but don't, Daddy," murmured the maiden, a flush of color tinging her fair cheeks. "You wanted to see me, you say?"

"As I al'ays keep a-waitin' o'late, little lady," sighed the veteran, his tones growing a bit unsteady as he gazed wistfully into the face of his fair young mistress; the face so deeply marked by sorrow of late days. "But somehow I felt the wantin' heap keener to-night than usu'l. An' 'most afore I knowed it, I was in saddle an' makin' a break fer the ole stampin'-grounds—yes I was, honey!"

"There is nothing—nothing wrong at the Shuttlecock, Daddy?" hesitated Imo, her eyes drooping before that keen but kindly gaze.

"Notbin', Miss Imy, to say wronger than usu'l. The boss is mighty sad-eyed and droopy-mouthed, but that ain't no news sence—"

"I know—I understand, Daddy Rule," murmured the maiden. "Then you wanted to see me on your own account?"

"I reckon that's 'bout the ticket, Miss Imy," nodded Rule, but with something so unnatural in his manner that the maiden instantly took alarm.

She checked Dandy, leaning forward in the saddle with a hand on the old man's arm, turning his face so that the silvery light of the moon came down across it.

A deeply lined face, with eyes far sunken in their sockets; the face of a man who had endured many trials and privations in his life, unless outward signs bore false testimony.

Judged by his face alone, or by his face and his bowed, shrunken body in connection, Rule Keeler might have been well along toward his three score and ten years. His hair and straggling beard were gray, almost snowy-white, and growing very thin.

Yet when there was work to be done, men were ready to swear that the veteran could hold his end up without half-trying, seeming totally insensible to fatigue or lack of sleep. And in all Rack-about Range there lived not a more reckless or accomplished rider.

"You are keeping something back, Daddy?" her voice growing almost stern as she held his faltering gaze with her glowing eyes. "There is something wrong—something you are dreading to tell me! What is it? What is troubling you, Daddy Rule?"

"Shall I cross my heart, Miss Imy?"

"Rather, tell me frankly what is troubling you. Mr. Pollard is well? Nothing serious has happened to him?"

Keeler sighed audibly, but there was nothing else in his face or manner to confirm the sudden fear which had grasped her heart as an iron hand with fingers of ice.

"Well in body, Miss Imy, but powerful porely in mind an' heart, ef you will make me say it, honey—so thar!"

Imo removed her hand and permitted impatient Dandy to advance. Her head drooped a trifle, and her unshaded face showed pale as marble.

The old man rode beside her in silence, covertly but closely reading that face, his thin lips moving as though they wanted to pour forth consolation but did not know just how to set about it.

"He's bin down the Range, an' mebbe won't be back afore the morrow, Miss Imy. When I fu'st sighted you, it struck me mebbe it mought be him comin' home, an' I reckoned ef it was I'd hev to putt off my lookin' ye up ontel 'nother time. Wuss luck that they's sech a turrible change come over the two ranches!"

"Evil days indeed, Daddy," sighed the maiden, turning her face aside to brush away a sparkling tear. "It's naught but evil since—since poor father was—since he died!"

"Don't I know it?" almost fiercely cried the old man, his bony right hand clinching tightly and quivering in the air above his head. "Hain't I spent many a long hour cussin' the hand that brung sech bitter black sorrow onto the only two human bein's in this world I knowed how to love? But the time'll come to lift the clouds, an' mebbe I'll be the means o' fetchin' that time round—please God!"

CHAPTER IX.

MISTRESS, MASTER AND MAN.

IMO THORPE was strongly affected by this earnest outburst, and her eyes were dim with unshed tears as her hands crossed over to clasp that recording hand.

"Heaven speed the day, Rule Keeler!"

"Amen!" gravely muttered the veteran, his eyes lowering and his white-crowned head resuming its usual stoop.

Side by side the two horses proceeded, walking now, just as though their spirits too were under the dark, sad influence of that yet unexplained tragedy of almost a year ago.

Long before Bailey Thorpe came by his death, Rule Keeler had found employment on the Diamond Cross Ranch, proving himself a truly valuable hand, winning the confidence of his quick-tempered master, if not his actual affection.

Neither master nor man were of the Damon and Pythias order, but Rule Keeler was ever ready to carry out any order given him by Bailey Thorpe, and the owner of the Diamond Cross brand soon grew to know that when he needed blind, unreasoning service, he could not more surely win his ends than by appointing "Daddy Rule" his deputy.

Imo Thorpe, also, soon learned the same lesson after her arrival at the ranch from school, and to Rule Keeler she owed much of her equestrian skill, her efficiency with the *riata*, rifle and revolver.

At the time of that awful tragedy, no single man had worked more ardently, almost viciously, to solve the mystery and bring to justice the brutal assassin, and to none other, so far as could be seen, did Rex Pollard owe a blacker debt; for Rule Keeler was among the first to call for his arrest, trial and hanging for that crime, pointing out that bloody smear which marked an imperfect hand on the bosom of the murdered ranchero.

And even after the accused had plainly proved an alibi, after it had been shown by unimpeachable testimony that his presence at or near the scene of the tragedy on the night which brought Bailey Thorpe to his doom, was impossible, Rule Keeler still snarled and panted for blood, the bitter agony of his fair young mistress seeming to have unsettled his own brain.

But then, as the weeks and months crept on, leaving the mystery deeper and blacker than ever, a change came over the veteran cowboy.

It may have been that his over-wrought brain had had time to cool and clear, permitting him to realize what by far the majority of the dwellers on Rack-about Range had from the first felt confident of; that it had been a physical impossibility for Rex Pollard to have done the cruel deed. It may have been that, with that clearing up, Daddy Rule could see another cause for those fair cheeks to grow white and hollow, those brown, deer-like eyes to dim with unshed tears; for he left the Diamond Ranch, now under charge of Chester Thorpe and his young son, Will, engaging with Rex Pollard.

And from that time to the present, Rule Keeler was a staunch, uncompromising defender of the man whom he had come so perilously near hanging a few months before.

"Miss Imy?"

"Well, Daddy Rule?" and the maiden gave a start as she answered that hesitating appeal.

"He's a mighty piert-lookin' an' talkin' man, that feller back yen' way," with a nod to the rear. "Folks say he's wuth 'nough fer to buy up hafe the hull Range ef the likin' was to ketch him that way."

"I've heard that many heavy games take place at the Alhambra," Imo said, her voice growing cold and something like a sneer echoing in her speech. "I've also heard that Mr. Chandler owns the gambling-rooms."

"An' I've hearn some say that he never yit set up a mark that he didn't git thar, by hook or by crook, Miss Imy."

"Don't you believe all you hear, Daddy," impulsively cried the maiden, one hand quickly touching the arm of her escort. "Rumor lies at times, and I know one mark he has not—never will win!"

"Praise the good Lawd!" ejaculated Keeler, his voice ringing out in rejoicing that could hardly be feigned. "That is, ef I hain't made a slip-up in guessin' at the mark. Miss Imy?"

"Well, Daddy?" smiled the maiden, encouragingly.

"They say a man's a man, but 'pears to me that's like measurin' the pints an' quarts an' pecks all up as one. Ef I was huntin' a sport that'd rather win a wife through slick fingers than to aim her by a true, lovin' heart, I'd go ketch Lee Chandler. But ef I wanted a man, in all that tarm ought to imply, 'tain't at the Alhambry nur the likes o' them bell-holes I'd think o' lookin'. No I wouldn't, honey!"

"Where would you look, Daddy?"

Her voice lowered, her eyes drooped, her pale cheeks won a brief tinge of color as she awaited the answer to her question.

"Whar they's a heart bowed down with double grief, Miss Imy," was the earnest reply.

"Whar's a man that's a man from crown to sole, cl'ar through an' back ag'in, an' never more truly a man than now that he's eatin' the heart o' him out with bitter grief an' despair!"

The old man broke off, his withered face turned toward the silent maiden, half-beseeching, half-defiant. But no answer came, and Imo Thorpe rode on with bowed head.

But she did not quicken the pace of her mount. Instead, the keen-eyed cowboy fancied she tightened her reins slightly.

"'Tain't fer me to name no names, little lady," he added, his tones strangely soft and even beseeching as they came through the night to her listening ears. "But when I hear folks talk o' one man an' laugh an' begin fer to say mebbe they'll be jolly old times once more on

Rack-about Range, with lick'er flowin' as ef out of a mighty spring, an' music an' dancin' an' all sech-like caperin's gwine on from day's beginnin' to day's finis; waal, it don't need twicet to make me think of 'nother man who's suppin' bitter, black sorrow, an' all through no fault of his own—wuss luck me fer the part I tuck into settin' up the fool cry in the fu'st place!"

"You thought you were doing what was right, Daddy," said Imo, her tones unsteady. "You were honestly trying to avenge your master."

"An' all the time it was workin' up a murder every bit as black an' mistaken as the other!" harshly cried the old man, tossing back his head and glancing toward the stars for a single breath. "The old master knowed then as he'd be the fu'st to tell you, Miss Imy, ef he could make his voice retch clean to whar you set on Dandy this night! Ef he could come back an' tell all, little lady, Boss Thorpe'd tell ye Rex Pollard never had no hand in his dyin'—I know it—I jest more'n know it, I tell ye!"

"As I know it, Rule Keeler!" flashed the maiden, hand on his arm and eyes blazing into his as she spoke swiftly. "From the very first I knew he was innocent, and I never hated mortal being worse than I learned to hate you when I saw you so fiercely bounding an innocent man down to a shameful, ignominious death!"

"Don't I know it?" his voice softening, a yearning light glowing in his sunken eyes as he met her fiery gaze. "Wasn't it that, more'n anythin' else that pulled the blind scales from my eyes? Fer ef you couldn't think him guilty, then I knowed I was on the wrong track. An' then—you hain't fergot what he did fer me. him as knowed I hed bin the loudest-mouthed bloodhound onto his track! him as only hed to shet his eyes an' hold back his hands to hev his bitterest enemy clean wiped out by death! But he didn't. He resked his own life to save mine—an' me that very same day huntin' up fresh proofs ag'inst him—me that day hopin' to see him lynched by a drunken gang o' human devils!"

"Don't—I know—it makes me weep, Daddy, dear!"

For several moments they rode along together in perfect silence, but then Rule Keeler spoke again:

"One man a sport, a gambler, a keeper o' a golden hell whar pore fools is driv' clean crazy by losin' all that might make life a comfort an' a blessin' to thar kin-folks. T'other man what I've tried to show ye, Miss Imy: clean white to the core, an' ready to save his wu'st enemy, even at the cost of his own life. An' now, honey, ef I mought ax ye one question: Which o' the couple would a lady like you pick out fer a stay an' a stan'by through life?"

"Neither—unless true love guided me, Daddy."

"But ef the master was to—"

"The master is his own master, remember," was the swift interjection. "If any words need speaking, he can choose both them and the proper time for uttering them, Daddy Rule."

"Kin I tell him jest that much, Miss Imy?"

"No," was the slow response. "If he cares to know, he will speak for himself, and without your urging. Now, drop this subject, please. Tell me about yourself; you are not ailing, Daddy Rule?"

"Not to say jest that, little lady," hesitated the old man, a hand slipping into his breast and seemingly fumbling with something hidden inside his flannel shirt. "An' yit I'm sore bothered over a kind o' dream that I've hed more'n oncet o' late. An' not so much a dream, nuther, sence I've see'd it oftener in daylight than by night. Miss Imy?"

"Yes, Daddy?"

"I've hed a warnin', time an' time ag'in. Reckon I'm mighty nigh the round-up, Miss Imy!"

"Nonsense, Daddy!" with a cheery laugh through the night. "You're growing younger and stronger every day of your life. Time enough to begin such gloomy thoughts a score years from now."

"It's kind o' you to talk that way, honey, but I've see'd things—I've hed it brought to me that ef I want to smooth over the past I hain't got none too much time to waste. An' so—ef you'd be so kind an' fav'r'ble as to make the ole man a promise, Miss Imy?" his hand slipping from out his bosom, his bony fingers clasping a white package.

"Anything you care to ask of me, Daddy," was the earnest response as Imo held out a hand. "You've earned far more than I can ever repay, even though you live as many long years as I can see still in store for you."

Rule Keeler gave an audible sigh as he placed the little package in her hand, and there was visible relief in his voice as he uttered:

"I'll keep a-hopin', Miss Imy, but somethin' warns me bard that I'm mighty nigh the eend o' my rope. An' ef it's true—ef the eend comes too sudden fer me to do much talkin'—you'll see that what I've writ into that bit o' paper is 'tended to, Miss Imy?"

"Wouldn't it be wiser to tell me all, Daddy?"

Then you could explain your wishes more distinctly, perhaps."

"I ain't much of a scholar, Miss Imy, but I've bin mighty keeful in writin' what you'll find inside that paper, an' 'tain't so mighty bad mixed up but what you'll be able fer to make it out when the right time comes. It's—waal, you mought call it a sort o' will, I reckon."

"Whatever it is, Daddy Rule, I'll faithfully carry out your wishes, though I can't think of you as—why, Daddy, you're only a boy yet!"

Imo laughed as she spoke, but there was something in the manner of the old man that impressed her strangely. Possibly it was because her own nerves had received such a severe strain that evening, but despite her efforts to cast aside the wild idea, it seemed to her that she was listening to the voice of one already entering the grave.

"I'm proud to hear ye say so much, little lady," earnestly added Keeler, his gaze fixed upon her dimly visible countenance the while. "It'll lend me a sounder sleep then I've knowed fer a powerful long time—ever sence the warnin' fu'st come to me. Fer I know you'll be as good as your word."

"If it is so important, then, hadn't you better consult with a wiser head than mine, Daddy Rule?"

"It's 'portant to me, Miss Imy, though I reckon everybody else wouldn't look at it the same way. It's jest my will, so to speak, an' though I hain't got much more'n a prayer to leave, thar's the name o' one in yen' bit o' paper as'll be right joyful to git so much from the ole man, I'm hopin'. An' so ef you'll be so kind, Miss Imy. Ef you'll jest pntt that bit of paper whar it'll keep safe an' make hurry to open it when you hear o' me croakin' I'll hold it a monstrous favor!"

CHAPTER X.

FRESH FOOD FOR SUSPICION.

"It shall be just as you wish, Daddy Rule," was the grave reply. "I'll carry out your instructions to the very letter, though I hope—and fully believe—that this paper will be yellow from age before I'm called upon to break the seal."

"Mebbe I'm a old fool fer givin' 'way to sech notions, Miss Imy, but it's bin bore into me that I'm marked fer cuttin' out. An' ef it wasn't fer one thing—waal, 'nough is enough, an' any more 'd be too big a plenty! Sence you're so kind as to pass your word, I won't bother the pritty head o' ye with any more sech talk."

"And try to remember what I've so often threatened, Daddy," laughed the maiden, lightly. "I'm bound to dance with the groom at your wedding! It is a vow, and religiously recorded in my heart."

"Good Lawd, Miss Imy!" chuckled the veteran, casting aside his gloom and seeming to forget his superstitious fears. "Sech a gray ole stag as me? They ain't nobody on all Rack-about Range as 'd be ketched dead a-hitchin' on to sech a ruin—no they ain't now!"

"You're too modest by half, Daddy," nodded the maiden, trying to keep those ugly doubts banished from his mind by her light raillery.

"If it wasn't for making you too arrogant, I might tell secrets, but—Daddy?"

"Yes, Miss Imy?"

"You never would talk much about your past life, before you came to the Diamond, I mean. Are you perfectly sure there is no little love-story connected with that past? Quite certain that you are not meditating a surprise as well as a disappointment for all we girls? You are not going to vanish like a will-o'-the-wisp? This paper is not a sad farewell, bidding us wear the willow while you hie away to claim a blushing bride, far back in the States from whence you came?"

Rule Keeler chuckled afresh, seemingly in no wise displeased at this view of the case, but when he spoke it was gravely enough:

"I ain't gwine to say that I was al'ays a cowboy, nor sech as you hev 'come 'customed fer to see an' know me, Miss Imy. Time was when I held up the head o' me with any honest man. Time was when I had a home an' a fireside an' a fambly sech as any mortal man mought feel proud to own an' show; but them times is gone, never to come back ag'in!"

"Through no fault of yours I'm certain, Daddy Rule," softly said Imo, her hand touching his arm as they rode slowly on toward the now visible lights of the Diamond Cross Ranch.

"I'm hopin' it wasn't, Miss Imy," with a touch of bitterness in his tones, but straightening up in the saddle as he glanced forward and added: "Look at the lights, little lady! Reckon they've worked up oneasy at you're stayin' out so much later'n common, an' gittin' ready fer to go in s'arch o' ye."

"Yes, there's Cousin Will!" and Imo drew forth her silver whistle to send a clear, musical blast floating across the level space.

A shout came echoing back, and they could see a lithe figure leap upon a horse and come swiftly toward them.

"Don't fergit, honey!" muttered Keeler, hurriedly. "I'd tell ye heap more 'bout them old times ef I could, but—when the time does come,

open the paper an' consult with your uncle—will you?"

"I will, Daddy," nodded Imo, but she had time for nothing further just then, as Will Thorpe came dashing up, his gaze bent sternly upon the escort of his fair young cousin.

"It's Rule Keeler, cousin," Imo hastily cried as she noted his defiant manner. "I'm under great obligations to him, but I'll explain all when I've changed my habit for drier clothes."

"You've been in the river? Well, I'm mighty glad it's no worse than that!" her cousin cried, wheeling to her side without word or nod in recognition of the cowboy. "We began to fear you'd run—been run away with!"

It was an awkward slip, and Will Thorpe bit his lip as his horse shied away under touch of the spur, but if Imo noticed the change of expression, she made no open comment.

Turning toward Rule Keeler she hurriedly whispered:

"Wait near—I must see you again, Daddy."

He nodded his understanding, then checked his horse a bit, falling naturally to the rear, leaving the cousins to ride along side by side.

"In the river, you say?" asked Will, trying to smooth over his slip of the tongue as best he might. "How happened it? Did Keeler pull you out?"

"Dandy stumbled at the ford. I'll explain all when a bit more comfortable than I'm feeling just at present, Will."

The front of the rambling mass of buildings which composed the Thorpe home on Diamond Cross Ranch, was lighted up by lanterns and the glow that came through open doors and windows. A number of men were slowly retreating with their horses, as though convinced that the need of haste had vanished. And a stout, portly figure with bare head and snowy locks of silken hair fluttering in the air came running forward in undignified haste, mingling congratulations with admonitions and even sharp scolding.

"I'll feel tempted to lock you up, child! Lock you up and feed you on bread and water, by Jove! Turning us all upside down after this fashion and—hello!" as his niece slid into his arms from the saddle. "You're all wet and—glory to Mars! what's happened, anyway?"

But Imo slipped out of his clutches with a merry laugh, vanishing inside the building before he could ask another question.

She hastened at once to her own room, changing her habit for a dry suit, composing herself to meet and answer the certain curiosity of her relatives before returning to where they awaited her, in the dining-room.

She entered with hands clasped before her bosom, head slightly on one side, a provoking pout on her red lips as she meekly murmured:

"Please, sir, I didn't go to do it—it just happened so, and if you won't whip me, I'll never, never do it again—never!"

But her innocent jest seemed to fall flat. Instead of the laugh she counted on winning from both uncle and cousin, she saw them flush and interchange quick glances, Will even scowling blackly.

Instantly her mood changed, and in clear, crisp tones she spoke:

"Something has happened; what is it, uncle—cousin?"

"Thank the Lord it isn't as bad as we began to fear!" blurted out Chester Thorpe, brushing a fat hand across his heated brow. "You didn't run off—that is—ahem!"

Imo swiftly crossed to his side, her cold hands turning him until they stood face to face, her brown eyes catching a lurid light as she sharply demanded:

"Run away with whom, sir? Of what crime or folly have you been accusing me? Will said something of the sort out yonder, and now you say the same. What do you mean?"

"You stayed out so much later than common that—"

"Since when have I been limited as to hours or minutes, pray?"

"That's all right, Cousin Imo," doggedly interposed Will, his face paler than usual, but his blue eyes openly meeting the hot gaze which she flashed upon him. "I begin to hope our fears were foolish and altogether without foundation, but we really were afraid you had run away with—well, that Rex Pollard, since you insist!"

Imo turned pale as death, catching her breath as one hand flew to cover her heart. She recoiled, sinking into a convenient chair, passionately waving back her startled uncles as he would have come nearer to lend her aid.

"Back! Don't touch me, sir! It's bad enough in Will, but he is only a silly boy, while you—gray hairs ought to have taught you better manners, if not more common sense."

"Confound—that is, I mean—what do I mean, Will?" gasped the old man, his face turning purple, and his little eyes fairly starting from their sockets as he turned helplessly toward his son.

"Cousin Imo," steadily uttered Will, his slender figure seeming to grow and swell into manhood as his eyes fixed her passionate orbs.

"You can scold and mock us both if you like, but that won't alter blunt facts. Since you left this house on Dandy, Brown Joe brought in this

bit of paper which he found on the prairie while coming in from the herd. Will you please read it?"

He dropped a worn, soiled envelope into her lap, back uppermost, and a low cry broke from her lips, as she saw the name of Rex Pollard rudely scrawled thereon. For an instant she gazed upon it, then with a shiver struck it from her lap as she cried:

"What right have I—have you to read his letters, Will Thorpe?"

"The right of a relative who has sacredly dedicated his life to avenging a foully assassinated man!" flashed the youth, never looking more manly than he did in that moment. "And when Joe told me he had read the note inside—when he let drop that it concerned you, Imo—was I to let a foolish idea of honor hold back my hand?"

"You are prejudiced against him!" she passionately cried.

"I was not, and no one should know that better than yourself, Imo. I spoke up for him when it needed only a word from my lips—from the lips of any relative of Bailey Thorpe—to fasten the noose about his neck. You know that, Imo."

"But now—you believe him guilty?"

"I do. And when I can fasten the crime upon him, I'll have him hung like a sheep-killing cur!" flashed the youth, fiercely.

"Gently, son, gently!" panted his father.

"And kill me with the same blow!" moaned Imo, burying her face in her hands, bitter sobs shivering her lithe figure from crown to sole.

"Not if you are a true Thorpe—not if you are really your murdered father's child, little one," huskily muttered Chester Thorpe, dropping to his knees by her side, his arms gently closing about her waist. "You have vowed to avenge my brother, your father, with the rest of us, and you'll make your word good, even though it seems like tearing the very heart from your bosom. I know it—you know it, Imo!"

"If he was fully proven guilty—but he is innocent!" sobbed the stricken maiden.

"It was hard for me to think different, when you told me how he had wooed and won your promise to be your wife. I refused to believe it even when that horrible proof was pointed out—that bloody hand over the cold and silent heart of my poor brother!"

"It was all a foul trick to fasten the crime on an innocent man!" flashed Imo, lifting her head, her eyes aglow despite the tears that had flowed so freely from them but a moment before. "He proved his innocence, even to your satisfaction."

"By an alibi, but may not that have been bought?"

"You are cruel—you are trying to kill me, with my love!"

"I'm trying to soften the blow to you, poor child," was the grave reproof, as his unsteady fingers drew a folded slip of paper from the soiled envelope, holding it open before her reluctant eyes. "Since you refuse to listen to me, please read these lines, Imo."

Fairly against her will, the maiden's eyes obeyed, and after the first few words, she read on with breathless interest and growing horror.

RECKS POLLARD:—

"Ime gittin' mighty tired slingin' ink an' wastin' stamps onto you, but here goes fer the last time. Take warnin'."

"Ime cled out an' want rocks bad. You made a bigg hawl when you downed ole Thorp. An' ef you don't divvy up, Ile blow the gaf an' run you up a lim like skinnin' a cat."

"I was out that nite an' I see the hull job. I hed a mine to blow rite then, but reckend it ud pay biger to kepe shet. But ef I was of my bace then in thinkin' it, Ime abul to do it yit, you bett."

"Last kall Ime warnin' you, Reck Pollard. Come to 3 mild mot on wensday nite with a bag of rocks. or Ile send you hirenakight to stay fer buzerds bate."

"Thats awl an' plenty to ef you dont kum down lively. I mene biznes you bet yure life."

"BLUDY HAN NO THUM."

CHAPTER XI.

A SELF-ELECTED JUDGE.

"REALLY, gents, you almost make me begin to wish I'd kept out of this little game entirely," frowned the Sample Sport, his keen gray eyes passing from face to face, his thumb and forefinger seemingly trying to change his square chin into a pointed one. "I've often been accused of too much freshness, and I reckon I'm open to the charge this deal. Pair of white elephants, by glory!"

"Turn us both loose, and I'll guarantee you against any further trouble, Mr. Harper."

"Don't ye go fer to do it, boss!" spluttered Tick Slater, shrinking as far away as his bonds would permit, mingled fear and hatred filling his bleared eyes and causing his yellow tushes to whet together in a nervous shiver. "Leastways not him—it'd be bloody murder, no less!"

Grip-sack Sid touched a spring that caused his grip to fly open, and taking therefrom a cigar, he ignited it by means of a little brand.

"My judicial brand, gents," he gravely nodded. "Only for that I'd offer you a sample. Would

anyway, but I hate mightily to see a prime weed wasted, and unless faces lie badly, neither gent nor rascal could fairly appreciate one under the present circumstances."

"Is that any reason why we should be forced to hearken unto such idle chaff?" frowned the ranch-owner, his hot temper again getting the upper hand. "If you are not a coward—not in league with that lying cur and clumsy black-mailer yonder—turn us loose and stand aloof for five minutes!"

"Talking of reason—that hits me right where I pride myself," nodded Grip-sack Sid, through a little cloud of smoke. "I was raised on reasons, and never saw the time when I couldn't give a fair opinion. I've got one or two such right now, and if you don't mind—"

"You, Mr. Pollard," with a grave nod toward the ranchero, "are a gentleman, though somewhat testy and fire-tempered. Unless you wear a mighty cunning mask, you'd no more slug an enemy from behind than you'd thump a sick woman simply to keep your muscle up."

Pollard flushed slightly, a puzzled look coming into his face. He did not know just what to make of this stranger, but the bitter experience of the past year had rendered him doubly suspicious, and he was keenly watching to intercept some covert signal passing between the two men before him.

"As for you, Tick Slater," placidly added the Sample Sport, "it hardly calls for magic to name your class. Your face says rascal, and without half trying one can see the mark of a rope collar about that skinny neck, unless that same neck should chance to get broken by your heels in trying to outrun the hangman."

Slater gave an inarticulate growl, and his covert glance was evil enough to send a cold shiver crawling over any ordinary mortal.

But Grip-sack Sid smiled blandly as he caught the look, like one who only saw in it strong confirmation of his judgment.

"If I'm off, Tick Slater, you want to sue your sire and dam for libel. You're a thoroughbred scoundrel by the watch. You're all broken out with evil and general cussedness like a small-pox patient in full bloom. You carry your diploma on your front, and a blind man could read it off without glasses. Still—"

"He's been throwing mighty tough samples at your head, Mr. Pollard, and though I'm open to lay dollars against cents that he can't match them with the goods in bulk, it strikes me that he'd ought to be given a show. Then, if he can't make his words good, I'll feel free to kick both case and witness out of court—this court, anyway."

"Perhaps you can help him?" sneered the ranchero, frowning, his suspicions growing stronger with each glib-spoken sentence. "Bah! it's all a put-up job between you two—and who else?"

"That's precisely what I'm trying to get at," nodded Grip-sack Sid, ignoring the accusation and only accounting for the concluding words. "Scoundrel though he is branded, Tick isn't in that smart class, though he knows how to yelp to order when a hidden hand pinches his tail. So—witness?"

"Durned ef I'll open head fer you!" growled the fellow, surlily.

The stranger sport reached over and selected a slender stick, thrusting one end into the fire, smiling blandly in the ugly face of his prisoner while purring:

"Is your hide thick enough to be fire-proof, Slater?"

"You don't dast—what do you mean, durn ye?"

"Simply to brand you a liar, Slater," as he touched the glowing end to the rascal's side, causing him to flinch with a muffled howl, more of terror than of pain. "I hardly think you had completed your list of charges against Mr. Pollard before I clipped in, and I missed the opening chorus, besides. So—will you chirp free, or must I coax you to sing your little piece?"

Smooth, bland, smilingly though the stranger spoke, Tick Slater began to realize that it was but a glove of satin over claws of steel. And then, was it too late even yet? Might not the tables be turned if he could keep up a parley yet a little longer?

"What you want me to talk?" he sulkily muttered.

"As near the truth as you possibly can, Slater. I believe you was hinting at somebody being killed, wasn't you?"

"An' he done it, too, cuss him!" with a venomous glare toward Rex Pollard, who leaned against the tree-trunk, his eyes closed, his swarthy face sternly fixed.

"I think I heard you insinuate as much when I first came up to see what chance there was of striking a customer," nodded the Sample Sport, easily.

"Then you wasn't—nobody didn't tell you?" stammered Slater, flushing hotly before that keen gaze.

Rex Pollard swiftly opened his eyes, trying to read the answer in that bland face, but all he could see was a faint surprise.

"That there was to be a side-show here this evening, Slater? Well, hardly that much, though

I'd be lying if I said I came here altogether without warning."

"When did you meet Lee Chandler last?" sharply asked Pollard.

"Never met a person of that name, to my knowledge," came the easy response. "Friend of yours, may I ask?"

He received no answer. Pollard resumed his old position, a bitter sneer curling his lips.

What faint hopes he had at first entertained were banished now. He felt sure that this was all part of the devilish plot against his life and honor, and powerless to help himself, he waited for the end.

The stranger waited in silence for a brief space, seemingly expecting an answer to his question, but then he resumed:

"The fact is, Slater, you and your mates gave this little snap away, though I don't suppose you really calculated on so doing."

"Never set eyes onto the likes o' ye afore!"

"And begin to wish you hadn't later, eh?" laughed Harper. "Lucky for you if you don't double that wish before cock-crow, my pretty rascal! But that don't count."

"I was on my way to Round-up City, with the neatest, cheapest, yet most select line of samples you ever dreamed of, when I caught sight of you fellows making for the timber. I've got a fair pair of eyes in my head, if I do say it, and a sample pair of most elegant field-glasses in my grip to back 'em up. So—I saw you had a prisoner, and as I represent an undertaking establishment—give you a card after a bit—of course I felt bound to follow up such an opening."

"You went in at one side, and I came up at t'other. Didn't want to disturb the ceremony in case it had gone so far as saying prayers for the dying, consequently walked with my Sunday shoes. And then—well, I just chipped in on an off chance, as you see."

"That settles my part up to date. There seems to be a serious difference of opinion between you two. I'm a perfect stranger to both, and therefore eligible to office. Play I'm judge, jury, audience, rolled up in a pretty heap, and let the band play on!"

"Witness, you say you know all about the manner in which one Bailey Thorpe came by his death?"

Tick Slater gave a sulky snarl, but as the self-elected judge picked up the stick with which he had scorched him a few minutes before, he blurted out in haste:

"An' I say it over ag'in—that p'izen critter killed him!"

"Steady, witness! Say it slower, and go a little more into details if you want to please the court. When did this killing take place?"

"Nigh a year gone by—leven months an' over."

"Very good; that's near enough for the present. You can make oath the person in question really was killed?"

"They was a hole through the neck o' him big enough fer to kick a dog through; ain't that enough?"

"We'll grant as much, though I've heard of living men who could run a whisky barrel through their throats without winking."

Tick Slater forced a laugh at this remark, evidently hoping to curry favor, but the judge sternly reproved him.

"You'll find this is no laughing matter, witness. If you can prove your charge of murder, this gentleman must surely hang. If you only succeed in proving yourself a liar and black-mailer—well, the price of salt would go up high as a kite if your partners should attempt to save you!"

Rex Pollard gave a fierce growl as his patience gave way.

"Press this clumsy farce through, can't you? How much money do you join in asking for my liberty? Show your true colors, and I'll answer you as plainly as I answered your hardly more clumsy mate yonder. Not one cent, though you murder me by inches!"

"He knows I've got the dead sure double cinch onto him, boss," grinned Tick Slater, moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue. "He knows I kin pin the killin' right onto him, an' he wants fer to spite me all that's left him—see?"

"I see that the gentleman is growing impatient at your rambling style of testifying, witness, and I'm not blaming him a bit. Crowd on steam and get down to business. You said you saw Bailey Thorpe killed? Tell us about it, please."

"I did see the hull bloody job—wuss luck me that I was fool 'nough fer to lock my jaws when the right time come fer to open 'em wider! But ye see jest how it was, boss: this way."

"I was clean broke. Not a red to cross a empty stomach with. An' I knowed Rex Pollard was rich 'nuff fer to break my stoutest pocket bottom out ef I ketched him in a tight corner. So—"

"You witnessed the killing, then? Start in front and wade straight through, witness. How was the deed performed?"

"By shootin'. He toted a Winchester 'peter, but he didn't waste no more'n the one ca'tridge."

I see the blaze an' the moon was so light that I see the ole man throw up his paws an' take a tumble."

"You forgot to explain what took you to that quarter, but we'll leave that for future questioning. You saw a man shoot the one on horseback. You saw them both by the light of the moon. You must have been very near the spot to have recognized either or both."

"I didn't know either on 'em jest then," snapped Slater, with a vicious glance into the cool face. "I was lyin' in the grass—"

"Drunk, or simply waiting for a chance at the rich rancher on your own hook?" blandly interposed Grip-sack Sid.

Tick Slater shrunk back and shivered spasmodically as though the keen shaft stung him hard, though he tried to cover it with a coarse laugh as he saw Rex Pollard closely watching him.

"Ef you'd hed a fa'r squint at the red map he hed painted all over the back o' me, boss, all fer a lyin' charge o' liftin' a hog, you wouldn't wonder that when I ketched a glimps' o' him with a gun I hunted kiver an' lay monstrous cluss—no you wouldn't!"

"Then you saw a man whom you recognized, before that man murdered Bailey Thorpe? Saw him near enough to swear to his identity?"

CHAPTER XII.

DISCHARGING A WITNESS.

"I jest did!" viciously cried Tick Slater, nodding his red head toward Rex Pollard. "An' thar you see the werry identickie critter!"

The accused lost his forced composure, trying hard to burst his bonds that he might answer the atrocious charge as it fitly deserved; but his captors had taken all precautions, and once more he failed.

"Do you dare believe that lying devil?" he panted, hoarsely.

"How can I tell when I haven't heard all his evidence? Go on, witness, and bear in mind that if this court hasn't sworn you on the Bible, this court knows precisely how willful perjury ought to be rewarded. You saw the shot fired, and saw the victim fall. What else?"

"I see him—Rex Pollard it was ef you skin me by inches! I see him jump out an' light on to the dyin' man. An' ef I couldn't jest see, I knowed pritty well what he was doin'. The rancher al'ays kerried a big wad o' money 'bout him, an' they wasn't none found when they hunted up his body."

"How long did you stay there after the murderer went away?"

"Not a minnit!" spluttered Slater, changing color under that keen, half-laughing gaze. "Fer why—I wanted to pin it tight onto Rex Pollard. I didn't want to let a single link hang loose. I wanted him to see that I could mark out his hull trail, from start to finish. An' fer that reason, when he tuck his critter out o' the draw whar it was hid in the tall grass, I jest sorter sneaked a'ter him, clean from thar to the ford over Roarin' Fork."

"What was his object in going there, may I ask? Was it on his direct route home?"

"Not jest, but he 'lighted at the ford an' tuck to washin' his han's mighty keerful. An' as he was doin' of it, an' wipin' 'em off with a han'kercher, I see his left han' by the light o' the moon jest as plain as ef it was broad day. An' they was a thumb lackin'!"

"Are you so marked, Mr. Pollard?" asked Grip-sack Sid.

The prisoner answered only by a blazing glance, then reclosed his eyes. It was all a clumsy farce, and they might play it to the end without assistance from him.

"He cain't deny it, or ef he did his paw'd talk fer itself," cried Slater, seeming to forget his bonds in his ugly triumph over the man who had ordered his back striped for theft. "An' all Rack-about Range knows it! An' when the pore ole gent was found, cold an' stiff, they was the bloody prent of a no-thumb left han' stuck right in the middle o' his bald-faced shirt—so they was, now!"

Tick Slater paused for lack of breath, exhausted by his vicious hatred rather than length of speech, but Grip-sack Sid seemed in no hurry to break that silence or to ask further questions.

His strong face was calm and impassive, but there was a keen, almost painful intensity in the gaze which he fixed on the pale face of the accused. As though he felt it scorch, Rex Pollard opened his lids and boldly, fiercely met that stare.

"What are you waiting for?" he sneered. "If you expect me to plead before such a court as this, you are widely mistaken."

"I was trying to see if I could distinguish the brand of Cain," came the cool retort, then the Sample Sport turned again toward Tick Slater.

"Of course you made all haste to denounce the assassin?"

"No, I didn't, an' I tole you that afore," snapped the rascal, with an ugly scowl. "Fer one thing I was too bad skeered. I ain't bin an angel, to speak of, an' they's them in Round-up as'd jump basty fer to run me up a tree ef I giv' 'em a chauce. I jest trailed him to the

Shuttlecock, an' then lay low, waitin' fer my openin'."

"But he was accused?"

"By the red prent o' his han', yes. But he hed all fixed so he could show up a *halibi*, as they called it; men to swar he was miles an' miles off the Range all that night."

"And you held your peace through all. What for?"

"To hit him whar he'd feel it most, an' whar it'd do me the most good—in his pocket!"

"You meant to blackmail him, in plain prose?"

"I wanted what he'd more'n a-plenty. I could give him life fer ducats, don't ye see? An' when things simmered down to a quiet, I writ him fu'st one letter then 'nother, but he wouldn't milk. An' so I hed to git right down to plain business—see?"

"I see—possibly more than you do," grimly nodded the Sample Sport, throwing away the butt of his cigar as he added: "Do you know the meaning of compounding a felony? Do you understand what it means to be an accessory after the fact, Tick Slater?"

"No, I don't, nur I ain't keerin' so mighty much," growled the sulky rascal, yet watching the stranger as a cornered rat watches a terrier. "Ef I've stuck my fut into it, I'll make sure that durned rascal pulls hemp—Satan scorch me ef I don't!"

There was something about this stranger now that roused dying hopes in the breast of the ranchero, and he eagerly cried:

"If you are white—as I begin to think—take us both to Round-up and give us in charge of the marshal. Let that cur tell his story, and I'll face him down with the gallows between us!"

"Who hired you to hatch up this fairy story, Slater?" sharply demanded Grip-sack Sid, his gray eyes looking like living wells of fire as they took note of the rascal's face, changing to a sickly yellow.

He saw quite enough in that to convince him that he was on the right track, though Slater hastened to declare:

"I never hed nobody to say a word, fer it's Gospel truth ef I was to die fer it the next holy minnit, boss!"

"Of course you wouldn't lie about it, Slater," laughed the Sample Sport, as he opened a pen-knife and bent over the fellow, severing the stout cords which encircled his ankles. "Reckon you're in good condition for eating up the ground? Think you could swallow mile after mile until Rack-about Range might strain its myriad eyes out without being rewarded by even a dim religious glow from that blessed topknot of yours?"

"Don't—set him free and you're my blackest enemy!" hoarsely cried Rex Pollard, trying to spring to his feet, but only rolling over on one side, helpless and impotent.

But Grip-sack Sid paid not the slightest attention to him or to his fierce protests, lifting Trick Slater to his feet and steadying him thus until he could feel his footing.

"I simply ask as your friend, Slater," placidly added the Sample Sport, a curious glow in his eyes that the ruffian could not readily interpret. "Because I'm of the opinion that this immediate neighborhood is growing decidedly unhealthy for a fellow of your graceful form and handsome countenance."

"Take off these things an' I'll skin out too mighty quick!" the blackmailer spluttered, shaking his hands where they were locked behind his back.

"Dare to turn him loose, and I'll hunt you both to the world's end!" raged the rancher, his words hardly articulate, so intense was his wild passion.

"I'll see you later, Mr. Pollard," said Harper, with a side nod, then tightening his grip on the arm of the blackmailer: "Come, Slater."

"Whar to?" and the rascal shrunk back, his voice growing husky, his ugly face turning ghastly with sudden fear. "What ye gwine to do with me? Not—not?"

"Just so it isn't the hangman's knot, what matter, Slater?" laughed the stranger, as he forced the ruffian past the fire and into the dark undergrowth with an ease that revealed a wonderful strength of arm.

"I told ye all—hope may die ef I didn't!" panted the frightened rascal, longing yet fearing to break away from that grip.

"Of course you wouldn't think of lying in open court, any more than I would think of charging an honest, respectable, handsome citizen like you of such a crime. You've delivered your evidence, and I'm simply going to discharge you, as a witness—that's all."

Tick Slater was silenced if not reassured. With his hands in irons behind his back, he was perfectly helpless, even though his belt yet contained knife and one revolver.

Only until the two men reached the edge of the motte, where the bright light of the full moon shone plainly enough to serve Grip-sack Sid's purpose, for with a swift twist he flung Tick Slater to the broad of his back.

"Yelp aloud and I'll use a foot for a gag, Slater," he sharply uttered, taking knife and pistol from the rascal's belt, slipping the loaded

cylinder from its place and hurling all into the timber, but each one to a different quarter.

"I'm simply drawing your teeth to guard against your being tempted to take the back-trail for a snap-shot behind my back."

Yet he clearly had something more than this precaution in view, since he dropped to his knees by the side of his captive, swiftly yet thoroughly searching his person, leaving no possible hiding-place unvisited.

With little to reward him, however. Only a few bits of tobacco, a horn-handled knife and a few small silver coins. Not a scrap of paper of any sort, though he seemed most interested while searching parts where such an article would be safest in hiding.

"You're keener than I gave you credit for, Tick Slater," he said, drawing back a little when convinced that his search was at an end. "Or else the master you're playing bloodhound for is a keener!"

"I don't know what you're tryin' to git through ye," sulkily growled the fellow, lying still, afraid of worse should he attempt to rise without permission.

"Of course you don't," grimly laughed the Sample Sport. "I'm not so mighty sure I could tell my own self!"

"Then you ain't—I kingo my way?" ventured Slater, plucking up courage once more.

"And the straighter, longer way that proves to be, the less danger your blessed neck will run, my fine fellow," sternly warned the sport as he jerked the ruffian to his feet. "Don't you waste time in hunting up your chums. Don't even take the trouble to look for the man who set you on this crooked trail. For if daylight finds you inside the limits of Rack-about Range, Rex Pollard will have the hue and cry hard upon your heels!"

"He don't dast—"

"Then I'll sell him a sample of better pluck, you cur!"

"But you said—"

"And now I'm going to act—thus!" as he drew back just far enough to give the best effect to his nimble right leg as it swung forward and and struck Tick Slater in the spot most favored by such salutes. "Just giving you a sample of the pay such witnesses as you get in courts over which I preside."

With a howl of mingled pain and rage, Tick Slater shot forward, closely followed by the Sample Sport whose feet in turn played a most lively tattoo on the rascal's rear.

And as they drew near to where Tick Slater had left his horse on entering the motte with his prisoner, Grip-sack Sid concentrated the might of a full dozen kicks into one that fairly lifted his witness from his footing and hurled him headlong almost beneath the trampling hoofs of his snorting, frightened horse.

"That's your receipt, signed with a stub-pen, Tick Slater," laughed the Sample Sport. "Show it to your master and tell him that I've a full line of the same ready for his selection at any hour."

Satisfied with the present lesson, Harper aided the groaning rascal to climb into the saddle, then struck the spirited creature a sharp blow with his open palm, sending it away over the plain at full speed.

"Go it, you evil man's dog!" he muttered as he watched the rider out of sight, then turned toward the little glade. "Now for the other fellow. Will he shake or shoot, when I give him the use of his paws?" he added, with a short, peculiar laugh.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT THE ROUND-UP SHARP HEARD.

"Yes, I'll get there—mark it down, Imo Thorpe! And when I do—when I've caught the turn, I'll make the most of my winnings, be sure!"

Lee Chandler sat his horse, gazing steadily after the receding figures of Imo Thorpe and Rule Kseler.

There was a fixed smile upon his handsome face, but there was precious little of mirth in it. His eyes glittered and glowed through the gloaming as though backed by living fire, or as though they marked the human tiger to which Imo Thorpe was even then comparing him.

Motionless as a statue the Prince of Round-up sat there, watching the fading figure of the woman whom he had sworn should become his bride, let the cost be what it might. And not until both riders and their animals were swallowed up by the increasing gloom did he show sign or make a move of life.

"Gone! But I know where to find her again!" he muttered, with a long-drawn breath as he wrenched the head of his horse around at a sharp angle. "Ay! skittish as she acts right now, and independent as she's so mighty fond of showing herself—bless the dainty darling! I really think I like her all the better for it!"

If true, that liking did not tender his heart much, for with the words his armed heels were sharply scoring the quivering flanks of his good horse, even while his strong hand held him back by an unyielding pressure on the reins.

It was a complicated affair, and though he

had at first glimpse fancied his cause was to be materially benefited by the accident through which he might render Imo Thorpe a service, without more than the slight inconvenience of a wet suit of clothes and the loss of a few minutes, which might be readily made up by hard riding, now that the effort had been successful in one sense of the word, he found it anything but easy to say just what he had gained.

"Con—bless her dainty little picture!" he muttered, with a scowl that effectually eclipsed his stereotyped smile. "From start to finish she stuck to her system. Not even the ghost of a smile when she hit me hardest. Cold as an iceberg, keen as a brier, taking particular pains at each turn to let me see she followed my lead only because there was no other open."

"Yet she can melt—don't I know it? She could smother a man with kisses and crush him into breathless bliss with her arms—if the notion caught her, or if the right man came along at the right time. It's there—I've seen it in her face, her eyes, time and time again, though she never knew it. Worse luck me!"

Intensely bitter were the concluding words, for Lee Chandler fully realized the truth which he had unconsciously expressed. That look had never come to the face or eyes of Imo Thorpe because he was nigh her.

"All the same, it shall, in good time," he nodded, slackening the reins and permitting his chafing steed to shoot forward at will. "I've chipped in earnest, and now I'll crowd the game for all I'm worth. I can't lose, and when I do win—Imo, you're my honey!"

Without crossing the river, Lee Chandler kept along at a rapid rate, his brain to the full as busy as the heels of his good horse, as though he had both time and ground to make up.

Long before this time he had counted on being safely at his destination, and now as he cast a keen glance upward to note the position of the full moon in the vault, its clear light revealed a darkly frowning face.

"Will they keep the fish playing? Has he got wit enough to alter his game according to the run of the cards? Can—he must?" with intense earnestness, as a tight-clinched hand came down upon his thigh. "If failure comes through his or their clumsiness, I'll do worse than murder!"

And those who knew him best would have told you that when Lee Chandler put himself on record without a proviso, his word was an oath to be redeemed at whatever cost to others or to himself.

Imo Thorpe had given utterance to a belief which more than she entertained: that Lee Chandler was the real power behind the throne so far as the Alhambra, the noted saloon and gambling-hall of Round-up City, was concerned. But though this belief was gaining ground, there was no positive information to be obtained on that point.

It was fairly well known that Chandler made his living mainly by gambling, though he dealt at times in cattle, horses, and even ranches, having a neat little office building in town, over the door of which appeared his name, with the information that he dealt in real estate and monetary loans.

It was known, too, that Lee Chandler was a man whom a cautious person would prefer to have as a friend than as an enemy. Not that he was given to brawling through pure love of fighting, but he had the reputation of a "stayer," who would prefer death to "taking water," let the odds be never so great against him.

Round-up City was by no means a metropolis, and so it is not so strange that all the town became aware, almost as soon as those more intimately concerned, of the fact that both Lee Chandler and Rex Pollard were trying to win the daughter of Bailey Thorpe for a bride.

A few of the more reckless began placing their bets according to their judgment as to the winner in the race, but others, of a more serious nature, shook their heads and predicted trouble.

Of the two rivals, Lee Chandler had by far the larger following, for he was ever bland, ever smiling, with a generous hand and an open pocket, while Rex Pollard was too stern, too haughty and reserved for the younger and wilder portion of the population of Rack-about Range.

Of course there were exceptions, and his backing, if it may be termed, came from the older, more solid class, mainly the ranch-owners. And as these allies brought with them, for the most part, their cowboys and other retainers, the master of the Shuttlecock might have fared worse when the bitter test came between the rivals.

Unfortunately for Rex, Bailey Thorpe was among those who never liked him, and when the young rancher made known his love for Imo, asking her hand in marriage, the hot-tempered parent turned upon him with curses and bitter threats.

Pollard was fully as quick to flash up, and before the two men parted, threats had been uttered on both sides, and the breach between them lay deeper and wider than ever.

And when the dark morn came when Bailey Thorpe was found, cold in death, with the red print of that mutilated hand showing clearly

over his heart, those were not lacking who could recall the bitter vow of Rex Pollard to get even.

"That alone was enough to justify his lynching," frowned Lee Chandler as he rode rapidly forward, brooding over the matter, as he had so many times before. "And the hand-print! His, to an iota, and never another like it in all Rack-about Range! It *should* have hung him without judge or jury—it *shall* hang him, or I'll go broke on it!"

A vicious thrust of the keen spurs sent the good horse forward with a spasmodic leap, and the shock served to clear the clouded brain of the plotter. With a swift, comprehensive glance around him he nodded his head toward a distant clump of timber, dimly visible under the light of the full moon.

"There it is, and I'm not so terribly late, after all!" he muttered barely above his breath, checking his horse a bit like one who deemed it unwise to herald his coming too loudly. "If the rascals have played the cards as I directed—well, the game is all but won!"

As he drew nearer to the motte, Lee Chandler brought his horse down to a walk, veering a little from a direct line, finally drawing rein in a swale where the grass grew ranker from the greater moisture.

Dismounting, he tapped the animal across its knees. With a gentle whimper the horse lay down, and Chandler lightly knotted the reins about its forelegs, as a reminder not to attempt arising without permission was given.

Only pausing to look at his pistols and make sure they were in good working order after their wetting, the Round-up Sharp turned his back upon his horse, crouching lower as he left the higher grass, his eyes fixed intently upon the little timber island ahead.

"Not a sound—not a ray of light!" he muttered to himself as he stole along. "But the trap must have worked all right. Unless—I had it too straight for the tip to be false!"

Almost fiercely he strove to reassure himself, but it was with a steadily growing uneasiness that he finally paused at the edge of the motte, straining his ears in vain for any sound or signal from within.

A faint, drowsy hum of insects. The barely perceptible sighing of the gentle breeze as it eddied through the treetops. Only that. Not a hint that human beings might be found under that snug cover!

With pistol drawn, Lee Chandler crouched low down and stole silently into the motte, seemingly guided by instinct, for it was too dark for eyesight to avail aught, just there.

A smothered curse parted his lips as he gained the center of the grove without making the discovery he panted for. The little space which is almost invariably to be found in a clump of timber of this description, was dark and deserted by all save himself.

"Am I too late? Have they grown tired of waiting and gone? No, even *they* couldn't make such an infernal blunder as that!" the Round-up Sharp growled viciously, as he realized that those he hoped to find were nowhere within that motte. "He's later on the trail than we counted on. He hasn't been trapped yet. That is it—that *must* be it!"

No longer thinking of caution or silence, Lee Chandler crashed through the stiff undergrowth, and paused at the edge of the river, straining his eyes to pierce the dim distance beyond.

Keen though those eyes were, their owner could recognize naught that might soothe the angry passions fighting in his heart. The plain was deserted, so far as his vision extended.

"Could he have taken the upper trail? Would he strike across lots as the shortest road home? Hardly that!" with a low, cruel laugh that betrayed his merciless nature more fully than even his muttered sentences. "That would carry him too near the black gallows, and he'd fear running up against the grim ghost of old Thorpe!"

He took a cigar from his case, but hurled it away even as he was taking the first puff.

"Steady, Lee, old fellow!" with a swift frown at the thought. "You can't afford to make even a little slip, and as the black-avised saint never smokes, he'd be quick to catch the scent of a cigar on this damp air. If he comes!"

Ever that ugly doubt!

He had never once discounted possible failure from such a cause.

He had received such positive information that Rex Pollard would pass along that trail on his way home. He had so carefully drilled his chosen tools in all they were to do, say, and insinuate.

And now—was it all to go for naught?

"If it does, somebody has got to suffer!" Chandler savagely grated, as he again strained his eyes in the direction of the trail, not much more than half a mile from where he stood. "If Tick Slater has made a botch of it, I'll rip his heart out and make him swallow it raw!"

"I can't think it, even yet. The tip was true, that I know. And if they followed directions, they couldn't miss trapping the cur. Then—By the holy smoke!" with a start, as a

possible solution of the enigma flashed upon his excited brain.

"I told him the motte lying to the left of the trail, and he swore he knew it well. I meant the left going away from Round-up. Could the thick-head imagine I meant the left hand coming in?"

The words had barely passed his lips before his ears were saluted by the rapid rattle of firearms, coming from nearly the direction in which he was gazing.

"That's the reason—curse the rascal for an idiot!" grated the Round-up Sharp, as he hearkened for a single breath, to make sure he had not mistaken the direction, then dashed away toward his horse.

CHAPTER XIV.

GRIP-SACK SID'S ARGUMENT.

WITH that grim query still warm on his lips, the Sample Sport turned to re-enter the motte, making his way leisurely back to the little glade in which he had left Rex Pollard helpless in his hot rage.

He found him just the same, lying on his side, unable to resume his sitting posture without assistance, which was promptly lent him by the bland-tongued stranger.

"There you are, partner," he said, cheerfully, as he drew the ranch owner up so that his back was once more supported by the tree-trunk. "Sorry I couldn't attend to it before, but Tick Slater carries a pair of remarkably long legs, and it tires me all out to run a foot-race."

"You haven't set him at liberty?" hoarsely demanded Pollard.

"Well, sorter yes and sorter no," laughed the stranger, drawing back a little and opening his grip which still hung at his side. "I did set his legs free, as you doubtless saw for—"

"Then you are in league with the devil!"

"Meaning Tick?" purred Grip-sack Sid. "Don't you think you're giving him a grade or two higher than he really deserves? One of Satan's imps, possibly, but hardly Prince Lucifer himself."

"Will you set my arms at liberty?"

"Certainly I will, but—one thing at a time, always," nodded the Sport, producing a couple of cigars and holding one to the anger-quivering lips of the prisoner. "Smoke? Warranted better than the best, and sure to smooth down the most ruffled temper living! Pride myself on them. Not another house can show such a bargain, and we lose big money on every box sold. Couldn't put them on the market at twice the money if we didn't sell so terrible many."

Pollard scowled darkly, his eyes ablaze.

"What do you mean to do with me? Come to the point if you've a spark of manhood in your composition. Curse you for a—"

"Please wait until I light up, won't you, Mr. Pollard?" quietly asked the Sample Sport, returning one cigar to his grip and picking up a live coal with which to light the other for his own use. "Habit I've got into since Parson Jones hitched me in double harness. Nothing like a good cigar to take the curse off—not that my honey ever scolds, mind you, partner; far from me to even hint that, even at this long distance apart; but—well, somehow you reminded me of Angel just then!"

Once more Rex Pollard fought against his raging temper, knowing that he had naught to win through it from such a cool customer as this in whose power he lay. And when Grip-sack Sid had fairly ignited his weed, he smiled blandly as ever while gazing benevolently upon his opposite.

"As I stated to say, I set Tick Slater free, up to his waist, but he was so terribly anxious to get away that he never waited for me to unlock those bracelets. Maybe the rascal fancied he could pawn them for a snort of old rye—never thought of that!" with an air of mild surprise beaming from every pore.

"You sent him away—where?"

"Discharged him, by kicking both witness and case out of court. If he rests easy on the anxious bench for a full month to come, then I'll lose my faith in good leather!" laughed Grip-sack Sid, thrusting one of his broad-soled boots into the firelight. "Pity it couldn't have come off in town and in broad daylight. I'd take a score of orders on the strength of that sampler!"

"You heard what that lying devil said. You saw how he and his mates treated me. You admitted that he was a scoundrel, unfit for belief. Yet you turned him loose, and hold me still in his bonds?"

Rex Pollard forced himself to utter these sentences steadily, holding his savage resentment back lest it only work more evil.

Grip-sack Sid watched him closely, nodding his approval at the end.

"If you'd only make that calmness genuine, Mr. Pollard, I'd almost break my neck setting you free. But this is the idea: I've only got one life to my name, and if I should lose that, I'd be worse off than a drummer without his grip of samples."

"You know you've done enough to forfeit that life, then?" quickly cried the ranch owner.

"I know you think I have, and just so long as

you cling to that idea, just that long I'll keep arguing away to the contrary."

"Or until Tick Slater comes back with the help you sent him off after! Why not shoot closer to the true mark?"

"He *may* come back, but if he does, be mighty sure he'll have a solid breastwork in front of him," grimly laughed the stranger. "I told him to get beyond the limits of Rack-about Range just as quickly as horseflesh could carry him, and he knew I meant all I said, too. I put my royal seal onto the order, though he'll need to hunt a mirror before he can see it for himself."

"But that don't count. I'm worrying my head most over your case, just now. And when I watched Tick Slater off, a bit ago, I turned this way with a wonder which you'd be most apt to do: shake or shoot, when I set you free?"

"That very doubt ought to have answered your question!"

"I thought so," with a grave nod as he opened his grip again and fumbled inside for a brief space before drawing forth a little vial containing a dark liquid. "You're still feverish, with a monstrously rapid pulse. Now I've got a sample bottle of the greatest febrifuge mortal skill, study and philanthropy ever concocted, and the house I represent—"

"Curse your rambling jesting!" cried Pollard, hotly.

Grip-sack Sid dropped the vial into his grip, then coolly squatted on his heels before the captive ranch owner, his face and voice cool and resolute as he spoke:

"Jesting goes, and we come right down to hard-pan, Rex Pollard. You sling hard words, and I'm going to show you just how ungenerous they are, and with what slender grace they come from your lips after all I've done for you this night."

"Turn me loose. Give me knife or pistol, then act instead of talking—if you dare!"

"So Rack-about Range might have another bloody butchery to smack its lips over?" smiled the Sample Sport through a curl of smoke. "Now I'm not aching to butcher you, though I could do it, on a pinch, rather than go back on my house. But I'd heap sight rather prove to you that I've already given you a life."

"You are a coward, then?" with savage coldness.

"I'll ask you to answer that question when your head grows a bit cooler, Mr. Pollard," with a crisp bow. "Just now you're no more fit to reason than a poor devil with snakes overflowing his boot-tops."

"I said I had already granted you a life. Now to prove my words:

"You heard all that Tick Slater said. You saw how he squirmed when I asked him who stood at his back and played him for a cat's-paw. And if you were not mad-blind, you must have seen that he was genuinely in earnest when he asked me to take you both to town so that he might make a clean breast of it."

"Didn't I ask you to do the same thing?"

"You did, and in so doing you convinced me that, just at present anyway, you stood in sore need of a guardian. Because why: if Tick Slater once told the story as he told it to me this night, before all Round-up, you'd swing by the neck sure as holy writ."

Rex Pollard frowned, but his eyes told that this argument was not wholly lost upon him. He began to see that, after all, Grip-sack Sid might still be a friend toward him.

"If I had penned Tick Slater up in a tight corner, think he would have stopped at perjury to save his worthless carcass? And if he made oath that he actually saw you murder—"

"He lied—by God's throne I swear it!" flashed Pollard.

"I know he lied, but the query is would all others know it that way? Wouldn't they remember that bloody print of a mutilated left hand, and adding all up in a lump, wouldn't they have run you up a tree as the quickest method of clearing the credit of the Range?"

Rex Pollard was silent, his face bedewed with drops of cold sweat.

Clearer and plainer he began to realize the facts of the case, as this cool stranger set them out, one after another.

Once again had his fiery temper almost surely ruined his life.

"Begin to see a little light, partner?" smiled the Sample Sport, flipping the ashes from his cigar, but as yet showing no signs of an intention to set the ranch owner at liberty. "I thought you would when I showed you a hole through the mirk. I'm famous for my arguments. And I reckon there isn't another man on the road who can show a more complete line of samples than yours truly, in haste."

Nevertheless Grip-sack Sid seemed very deliberate in his actions. He shifted his position for an easier one, gazing mildly at the pale face of his new-found acquaintance through the tiny curls of smoke, his smooth tongue placidly moving on:

"Now you know why I didn't haul Tick Slater back to Round-up City, but may be you're still blaming me for setting him foot-free while still keeping you in durance vile. That's another easy one."

"A blind donkey could see that Tick Slater didn't put up this little job all of his own accord. He's got a master hand back of him, and as long as we don't know just who that master is, we're in the grave—see?"

"I know the scoundrell!" flashed Pollard, hotly. "Lee Chandler!"

"If you really know it—plain, straight, law-court knowledge, mind you, partner! If you know it *that* sure, then the rest of the road ought to be mighty smooth traveling for you."

"I do know it, though I migot not be able to prove it in law," reluctantly admitted the ranchero.

"Just what I thought, and that's why I turned Tick Slater loose. 'Cause why: if he jumps the Range as I hinted he'd better, there'll be a mighty uneasy master on the go, hunting for his tracks. If he don't levant, then he'll be mighty apt to do some loud buzzing about the right hive, and if we can't spot the right covey it'll be mighty funny—see, Pollard?"

But a change had come over the irritable ranch-owner once more, and he frowned blackly as he crisply growled:

"I'd have pinched the whole truth out of him if you hadn't set him loose before I got free! Now he'll either get clear off, or he'll have plenty of time to give his master full warning—thanks to your folly!"

The smile faded from that strong face, and something like anger flashed into those gray eyes.

Taking everything into consideration, he had displayed a wonderful degree of good nature, at least in outward seeming, but just now it began to look as though he was coming to the end of his stock.

Slipping a heavy gold watch from his pocket, he glanced at the dial, nodded slightly as he returned it to its place.

"Time hasn't gone on a strike that I can learn, Mr. Pollard, and by my count Tick Slater has been gone half an hour. When I saw him last he was in a mighty hurry, but he had precious little control over his nag, since his hands were fastened behind him."

"All of which means?"

"That a hungry nag is mighty apt to hunt his manger. And if Tick *should* chance to run into a gang of his own kindney before then—well, they might be coaxed back this way before you are ready to receive company of that caliber."

"Then set me free, let me retain my weapons, and I'll welcome them so warmly all that come won't go back on their own legs!"

"I'm going to do that very thing," nodded Grip-sack Sid as he flung away his cigar and rose to his feet. "I intended it from the first, but you were so mighty hot against me that—well, if it comes to shoot or be shot, please remember that I've too much weight resting on my shoulders not to try for the first shot!"

With his keen pen-knife he rapidly severed the bonds confining Rex Pollard, then stepped back, pistol in hand.

CHAPTER XV.

A WORD FOR HIS MASTER.

IMO THORPE gave another sharp shudder as her eyes finally came to that brutally significant signature, and even in that moment she could give a thought to how cruelly those crude marks must have stung Rex Pollard when he first beheld them.

With a short, almost harsh cry she flung the paper from her, turning swift glances from father to son as she demanded:

"Is it on such evidence that you dare to condemn a man? Would you take such a clumsy trick as this before the solemn oath of a gentleman born?"

Chester Thorpe lifted the envelope from where it still rested in her lap, silently pointing to the postmark. That proved the letter had come through the regular mail, from Wilderness to Round-up City.

Imo read this meaning, and forced herself to speak more calmly.

"Does that make it any the less a foul calumny, uncle? To my mind it only blackens it and makes it all the more abominable. For if the writer was as ignorant, as coarse and clumsy as he tries to make out in that vile scrawl, would he dare trust to the mail what he might with greater ease deliver by hand? Wouldn't he fear to leave a clew by means of which he could be traced down?"

"What I'm thinking of most is this," slowly interposed Will Thorpe. "If an innocent man had received such a damning demand as that, would he have kept its receipt a profound secret for so long?"

"For how long, pray?"

"See how worn and soiled the envelope is, cousin."

"That may have come from the rascally cunning of its author, intending to cast abroad just such a suspicion as now seems to trouble you," persisted the maiden, her love withstanding every test. "For even if Rex Pollard should admit to me that he received and lost that vile scrawl, without making known the fact to any

one, still I would have perfect faith in his integrity!"

Father and son interchanged quick glances, then the elder man silently placed another bit of paper in the hand of the girl, saying:

"Read that, Imo, please."

It was apparently written by the same hand, but the ink was better and the paper cleaner, less soiled and worn.

A glance showed her that it was almost a copy of the first note, but with an addition that drew a sharp cry of indignation from her paling lips. That paragraph ran as follows:

"I aint trustin' you fer a sent. Ime up to your game but lle coppur it ef you don't come to limrick with the seads. Munny talks an' munny comes ur Ime orf to tell the ole jent youre ficksin' things fer to stampeed with the gal."

Imo slowly flushed crimson as she puzzled out the full meaning of those sentences, and coupled them with the strange reception which Will Thorpe had that evening given her.

"Will, did you—could you—For shame!" springing to her feet and flinging the paper far from her as she proudly, indignantly faced the startled men. "How dared you so basely insult a woman—a gentleman like Rex Pollard—by putting even an instant's trust in such a thoroughly vile trick as that?"

"What were we to think when—"

"That I had run away with a man while poor father lies in his grave unavenged? That I could give a thought to—"

Her voice broke and she sunk back into the chair, covering her face with both hands, shivering as with a violent ague-fit.

"You stayed out so late, child," gently uttered her uncle, his fat hand softly smoothing her hair. "And we never once thought of your going with your own free will. The note don't say that, if you—"

"Where did it come from? Was it with the other? Brown Joe, you said, I think; then he's aiding the cowardly enemy to ruin a man who is the soul of honor—the man I am proud to own I still love!"

"I found this note, cousin," quietly said Will Thorpe. "Will you charge me with being in a foul plot against Rex Pollard?"

Imo struggled to regain her composure, and in a degree succeeded. She even forced a smile—faint and wan, but still a smile—as she rose and took the hand of her cousin, their eyes meeting frankly.

"No, Cousin Will. All I accuse you of is hasty judgment and too great a readiness to condemn an unfortunate man unheard. Now—Will, once before you and I took an oath together: join me in another!"

"What is your wish, Imo?"

"Swear with me that you will try to discover the author of those miserable lines. Swear with me to bring him to a just retribution."

"Gladly, Imo. I'd give a hand if I could make it all clear and beyond possible doubt!"

"We will clear the fog away, Cousin Will—I feel it, I know it!"

Turning to her uncle, Imo said hurriedly:

"Give me those papers, please, uncle, and let me study them when I have cooled my poor brain. Thanks," as he placed them in her hand. "I will go to my room now. If—if you still cling to those vile doubts, perhaps you had better lock me in for the night!"

It was a cruel shaft, and winging it brought a flush to her cheeks, but Imo had an object in letting it fly, and another in so hurriedly leaving the room and presence of her relatives.

"If they knew—if they were to suspect what I intend doing, would they try to prevent me?" flashed through her mind as she rapidly retreated, the venomous notes tight gripped in her fingers.

Gaining her chamber, Imo closed and locked the door, slipping the key into her pocket before seating herself at the open window. It looked out toward the rear of the ranch proper, but facing the east, it was one of the coziest rooms in the house.

"Who is it? Who can be so bitterly cruel as to strike blow after blow, all dastardly, all bitterly vile?" she murmured, resting her fevered face against the casing, gazing blindly out through the moonlit night.

Instantly the face and figure of Lee Chandler seemed to rise before her, and so startlingly distinct was the vision that she drew back with a faint cry, as she might have done from his bodily presence in such a quarter.

"It is—it is *his* handiwork!" Imo panted, one hand pressed tightly over her wildly throbbing heart as she sprung to her feet. "I was blind not to see it before!"

Like a revelation it seemed to come over her brain, and all the argument or proof that the Prince of Round-up City might have advanced in his own favor would hardly have outweighed a feather just then.

"He must know—he must be put on his guard at once," was her next thought, and without daring to delay longer, she put into execution the idea which had caused her to leave her relatives below with that cutting adieu.

She even then resolved to see Rule Keeler again, if only long enough to bid him warn Rex Pollard against coming near the Diamond Cross

while matters looked so stormy. Now—she would have more than a simple caution to send him.

"He shall have them; he can put them to a better use than I!"

Imo passed through her open window, lightly crossing the little lean-to beneath it, then dropping to the ground in the shadows.

She paused only long enough to make sure no alarm had been taken from her movements, then glided away toward the spot where she expected to find faithful Rule Keeler awaiting her promised coming.

"Hyar I be, Miss Imy," came a guarded voice, and the next moment Imo Thorpe was beside the veteran, his horny hands clasping hers, both far from steady, though from such various causes.

"Good, kind Daddy Rule!" the maiden murmured, gazing through dimmed eyes up into his weather-beaten face, almost as though in it she saw her only living friend. "I knew I could trust you."

"Ag'in' the hull world, little lady!" impulsively replied Keeler. "Ef I could on'y blot out the past year, an' fetch all back as it useto was—ef I on'y could, honey!"

"It would be as heaven compared to hell!" with choking voice.

"They ain't—they didn't dast to—" hesitated the old man, finding it difficult to pick the right words to express his fears without running too great a risk of wounding the girl.

"Never mind; there's no time to waste in idle talk, Daddy," the maiden hastily interposed, as she pressed the papers into his hand and added: "Give these to your master as quick as you possibly can. Tell him how you got them. Tell him that I beg he will heed my warning, and go. He *must* go away from this section until the storm blows over!"

"You mean go clean off o' the Range, Miss Imy?"

"Yes. He must go, or worse may come of it. Tell him I say so."

"An' these, Miss Imy?" with a curious glance at the papers in his hand.

"Give them to him just as I give them to you. He will read and understand my meaning from what is there written."

Rule Keeler carefully deposited the papers in an inside pocket, but as he did so he shook his head, doubtfully.

"Course I'll tell the boss jest the words you put into the mouth o' me, Miss Imy, but 'twon't do no good. Leastwise 'twon't make *him* pull out o' the Range 'thout fu'st seein' *you*, honey dove. No, it won't!"

"He must—it may save his life!" panted the half-distracted girl, casting an apprehensive glance around them as though fearing momentary interruption.

"That wouldn't begin to faze him, Miss Imy, fer he's come to hold his life at a monstrous low figger o' late. An' ef double death stood in the way, he wouldn't run away 'thout fu'st seein' you ag'in. It'd look too mighty liko he was skeered o' standin' his ground, an' ef *you* blame him fer thet, I don't."

Imo wrung her hands tremblingly, her brain too confused to show him just which course to take.

"Mebbe I'm crowdin' too much, Miss Imy," hesitated Keeler, "but ef I mought say jest one word or so, why—"

"Anything—anything to save him from what I fear will prove his death! You don't know what cruel snares are being drawn about him, Daddy Rule, or you'd be eager as I to get him far away from this!"

"Leavin' you out, Miss Imy, they ain't a soul livin' as'd do more or go furdur to help Boss Pollard then Daddy Rule," earnestly uttered the old man. "But he wouldn't hark to my words fer a cent, an' so—did you know they was to be a sort o' circus or show in town to-morrow night, Miss Imy?"

"What has that to do with us, Daddy Rule?"

"Waal, ef mebbe you could fetch it 'round so's you mought go to the show, with the young boss ef you like it best that way, Miss Imy," hesitated the veteran, shifting uneasily under that keen, steady gaze and breaking off short as the girl turned sharply away with bowed head and interlocked fingers.

Only for a brief space, then Imo faced him again, forcing herself to speak clearly, steadily:

"Promise me that you will try every argument to induce Mr. Pollard to leave this section at once, Daddy Rule. Then—if he refuses to do so—then you can tell him I will attend this show, as you call it, in company with Cousin Will."

"An' I kin tell him you'll say a kind word to him, little lady?" eagerly asked the old man, now seeming far more agitated than Imo.

"He can join us on the ride home. Perhaps it would be better for him not to enter the hall. His enemies might try to entrap him, and—Daddy, you will see that he is guarded well?"

"With one mis'able life, anyway," nodded the old man. "I'll try all I know, fu'st, but it'll do no good ontel I say you'll see him ef only fer a minnit or two, Miss Imy. He'd die, double over, afore he'd let 'em throw up that he'd run from danger through bein' afraid."

"Go, then, and do your best to serve two weary, almost broken hearts, Daddy Rule," huskily uttered Imo, as she turned away to reach her room before her absence should be discovered.

CHAPTER XVI.

TICK SLATER WHETS HIS TUSHES.

WITH a muffled howl of terror, Tick Slater felt his horse bound away under the impulse lent by the ringing slap delivered by Grip-sack Sid, and instinctively he clinched his long legs closely to the barrel of the animal, to prevent being thrown headlong, thus increasing the very danger he hoped to avert.

The spurs with which his heels were armed pricked the frightened creature sharply, making its gait still rougher, causing it to arch its back, and alight stiff-jointed, until the half-stunned rascal divined the reason.

"Whoa, durn ye fer a— Stiddy, ye durn fool!" gasped the blackmailer, giving a smothered groan as the swift succeeding bumps added to the bruises wrought by Grip-sack Sid's "sample of good leather!"

It was like riding on a saddle of fire, and only for a fear of breaking his evil neck, Tick Slater would have thrown himself to the ground as the shortest measure of obtaining relief, in a measure, at least.

The fear that this would happen without his own volition, added to the swift passage through the cooling air brought by the night, served to partially clear the upset wits of the villain, and turning his toes inward, he secured a firm grip, without danger of adding torture to the fright which still dominated his mount.

He dared not feel for the stirrups just yet, and his hands were utterly helpless to aid him so long as those polished "bracelets" remained in place.

Thus it was that until far beyond the range of Grip-sack Sid's keen eyes, that mad flight continued. But then, little by little, Tick Slater calmed down his steel, speaking as soothingly as he could under the circumstances.

And, though he found it impossible to entirely check the animal, or to turn its head in a direction more likely to win him speedy assistance, after a few more minutes Tick Slater contrived to catch the reins between his teeth by leaning far forward.

Making his grip firm, he leaned far back, and brought a steady strain upon the mouth of his mount, those yellow tushes coming into good play.

"Devil toast ye!" he hissed viciously, as the animal came down to a walk, then stopped short in its tracks. "Wait! Jest wait ontel I kin git a loose paw ag'in! Ef I don't take the tuck clean out o' ye, set me down fer a— Thunder an' big guns!"

The dull thump-thump of hoofs behind him caused his head to turn, and his bleared eyes to glare backward. Rapidly drawing near, he could distinguish the outlines of two or more mounted men, and his instant fear was that the Sample Sport and Rex Pollard were seeking his recapture.

Fairly wild with dread of falling again into the hands of that cool sport, to say naught of the Shuttlecock owner, Slater drove his spurs rowl-deep into the steaming flanks of his horse, dropping the reins from his tushes, and bending low along its neck to escape a possible shot from the rear.

"Git! go it, you durn—"

The tortured animal lashed viciously out with its hind feet, then sprung high into the air and turned half-way around before alighting, giving the most difficult sort of "buck" for even a cool rider to defeat. As it was, Tick Slater was flung in a revolving tangle half a score feet away, striking the dry earth with force enough to have killed a dozen honest men.

He had barely time for one howling curse, then the shock knocked both breath and senses out of his carcass.

His horse dashed away in flight, but one of the two horsemen behind swiftly cut across the angle thus formed, swinging his *riata* and flinging it with practiced hand the instant he came within range of the fugitive.

As nearly every "saddle-wise" broncho will on feeling the rope, the runaway stopped short in time to avoid more than a temporary choking, permitting the rider to approach and secure it by a grip on the reins.

Meanwhile the second horseman had kept straight on to where Tick Slater lay in a crumpled heap on the short grass, laughing aloud as he leaped from the saddle and bent over the rascal.

"Trainin' fer a circus, pard, ain't ye?" he uttered in a coarse, mocking tone while straightening the limp yet shivering figure out. "Never see a top-loftier jump then that, nur a—wake up, pard!"

Tick Slater gave a choking groan, just in time to banish the fear which was beginning to take possession of his mate—for it was Dan West who had gone in chase of the runaway, and Bark Adams who now bent over the barely conscious wretch.

"Ef you want to try it over, Tick, yar's your critter!" laughed West, coming up at a canter. "Good Lawd!" gasped the blackmailer, feebly lifting his head.

"Course he wants to do it over ag'in, fer Tick never takes water—ef he does take a tumble fer luck, once in a little. Jest look at the mold fer a rawhide hat which he's made in the ground, will ye? Gee-glory to blazes!" breaking into a wild, reckless laugh, clasping his sides with his hands as he flung back his head.

"Shet trap, double durn ye!" snarled Slater, brushing the blood and dust from his face.

"An' ridin'—go 'way monkey on a cow!" snorted West, joining in that roar with right good will. "Ef I'd on'y hed one o' them pictur' machines fer takin' a side shot at the critter!"

"You'll ketch a shot sech—holy smoke!" breaking off his savage threat as that mechanical fumbling for a pistol recalled how he had been disarmed and sent away from the motte.

"Look ef they're comin'—you! I can't see—gi' me my hoss, durn ye!"

He staggered to his feet, reeling like a drunken man, the handcuffs glittering in the moonlight as he mechanically strove to fling out his arms to balance himself. And caught the eye of Dan West, and his wild mirth came to an abrupt end as a suspicion of danger assailed him.

"Stiddy—you!" his own revolver flashing from its scabbard and covering that reeling figure. "Pinch his gun, pard!"

"Gun be durned!" snorted Adams as his swift grip closed on the bright steel. "Got the darbies on, or I'm a howling liar!"

"An' you let him ketch me foul! You let him lock 'em on an' never jumped him from kiver!" panted Slater, his tushes snapping viciously together as he spoke. "Pritty pards you be!"

"Who done it?"

"What fer? Ain't it part o' the job?"

"Part o'—look ef anybody's comin', will ye? The eyes o' me is all bunged up 'ith dirt an'—see anythin'?"

"Not a booter," promptly replied Adams. "Who's to foller, anyway? Was that part o' the game, too?"

Tick Slater gave a sudden start as an ugly suspicion flashed into his whirling brain. It served to partly clear his wits, however, and he looked from face to face before speaking:

"Look yer, boys; you didn't go to town as I said, di' ye?"

"Lucky fer you that we never, ain't it?" retorted West, edging a little closer to his mate as if for better concert of action in case of need.

"You cached your critters an' snuck back fer to play spy, didn't ye?" persisted Slater, his tushes whetting together warningly.

"Waal, what of it?" swaggered West, cocking his head on one side as his hands rested on his hips, conveniently close to his pistols. "We knowed you was playin' us dirt. We knowed they was heap more rocks into the leetle job then you let on like they was. An' so—"

"You was thar when that durned critter jumped me!"

"Waal, we was thar or tharabouts," admitted Adams, with a grin as though the recollection amused him. "An' to cut it short off, we see an' hearn everything that tuck place up to the time you rid away in sech a monstrous hurry. Didn't we, Dan?"

"Bet your sweet socks we did, pard!" nodded the other.

Tick Slater gave a savage roar, clashing his tushes together until it really seemed as though they must shiver under the shock.

"You did? You see him 'huse me like that, an' you never chipped in to down a inemy an' help a pard?"

"Then it wasn't all a put-up job?"

"Holy smoke!" snarled the almost crazed rascal, stamping viciously about, his arms wrenching the irons and his tushes growing whiter with flakes of foam. "Was them kicks all play? Ef you'd ketched 'em like I did, you'd know plenty sight better! An' you never—"

"Stiddy, Tick, an' try to simmer down a bit," sharply uttered Adams as he let a huge hand fall heavily on the shoulder of the mad rascal.

"How was we to know any better? Didn't you say it was jest a game fer to pinch a few rocks out o' Pollard? Didn't you say that we was jest to let loose all holts soon's we got him to the timber, whar the man as set up the job was to chip in when you give the word?"

"An' didn't you say ef that same man was to even dream that they was other critters then you mixed up in the job, he'd kick like a bay steer an' button up his pocket?" chimed in West, sharply.

Tick Slater was rapidly cooling down, and beginning to realize that, after all, his mates had not been so much to blame for playing a part so nearly in accordance with the one he had marked out for them.

"You jest did, Slater, an' though you talked mighty smooth, we hed a idee it'd be heap bigger money into our pockets ef we mought ketch a squar' look at the critter who was to do the pinchin'. An' so—waa, we didn't see the feller Dan an' me 'lowed we would, but we reckoned it was the pure quill."

"Wasn't them durn kicks 'nough fer to let ye smell a rat?" snapped Slater, twisting his bruised body uneasily as he spoke.

"We see somethin' goin' on, but we wasn't nigh 'nough to measure jest how much they weighed," grinned West. "When he made the fust move to tote you out o' the ring, we stole off an' was layin' mighty low to the perayrie out yan' a bit."

"Then we straddled critter an' foller'd a'ter ye," supplemented Bark Adams, with a concluding nod.

"Look ef you kin git these darbies off, boys," said Slater, in subdued tones. "I've hear'n you make brags 'bout how you never see the pa'r you couldn't pick open in a wink, Bark, an' ef—"

"Turn to the moon, pard, an' ef they ain't a new patent, sence my time why— Stiddy, ole rocks!" with a grim chuckle as he fumbled in his breast for an instant. "New an' mighty bright, but old lock fer all that!"

"Kin you do it, think?" almost breathlessly asked Slater.

"I hev!" laughed the other, bringing the handcuffs around with a triumphant jingle. "Don't that look like it, pard?"

Slater held up his hands, turning them round about as though unable to fully trust to his own senses for a moment. Then a savage oath came from his throat, his yellow tushes grating and grinding, champing together like those of a wild bear standing at bay.

"You wanted bigger pay, critters, didn't ye?"

"Waal, ain't that nat'ral?"

"An' fer bigger pay you ain't skeered at the idee o' slingin' lead, mebbe?"

"Not ef the rocks weighs down heavy 'nough."

"Whar's my hoss? Stiddy, durn ye fer a lunkhead!" giving the reins a vicious jerk as the animal started back in fear. "Straddle critters, an' I'll tell ye the rest while gittin' thar, mates."

Promptly West and Adams mounted, one ranging on either side of their battered leader for the night, each ready to hear what he had to propose. Nor did they have long to wait, hot rage and lust for revenge lending Tick Slater's tongue unusual nimbleness.

"I kin prove that Rex Pollard killed ole Thorpe, an' you kin pull every dollar o' the reward; all I ax is to see him bang! Kill t'other feller, an' take Pollard alive ef ye kin!"

"It's a whack!" was the simultaneous reply, as they spurred on.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SAMPLE SPORT MAKES HIS MARK.

ALTHOUGH he had so fiercely longed for freedom of limb, now that the wish was granted him, Rex Pollard found it impossible to immediately take advantage of it.

The bonds had been snugly fitted in the first place, and his desperate efforts since to burst them asunder had bruised the flesh and by causing it to swell, impeded the circulation so much that now, the restraint removed, the hot blood prickled and stung sharply as it sped back and forth.

Grip-sack Sid said nothing, coldly awaiting the result of his actions, clearly determined to make no further apologies until the ranch-owner showed some definite signs of the course he meant to pursue.

He saw that ineffectual attempt to spring erect, and readily divined the reason why Rex Pollard gave a shivering ejaculation as he held up his swollen hands. He knew that those first few minutes must be full of torture, though of that peculiar nature which forces a laugh to mingle with a cry.

"It hurts so mighty much 'it feels awfully good—precisely," the Sample Sport half-laughed, as the ranch-owner leaned back against the tree-trunk, his eyes closed, his lips parted by silent gasps for breath. "Brisk rubbing would help you get over it all the sooner, but—well, even a fresh specimen of my caliber can grow weary of volunteering service for kicks rather than thanks!"

Pollard's eyes flew open and his gaze fixed on the face of the speaker with a growing curiosity that fully equaled the animosity therein.

"Who are you, anyway?" he asked, impulsively.

"I was born a Harper, christened Sidney, nicknamed Grip-sack Sid and the Sample Sport before I'd been on the road a single year," was the brisk yet curt reply.

"I mean—what are you?"

"A crack-brained idiot who seems to think it's his duty to go about the world lending his aid to fellows who only pay him off in hot curses and cold threats of bloody murder and mass-creation. Or, if that is still too foggy for your easy digestion, Mr. Pollard, I'm your friend if you need one, a stranger if you prefer it that way, and your enemy only if you force the position upon me."

There was a strong contrast between those two sentences, both in tone and manner. The first was flippant, but tinged with a certain acerbity; the second grave, earnest and dignified.

It showed Sidney Harper up in a very different light from that in which Rex Pollard had at first regarded him, and almost for the first time

the young ranchero began to realize that this stranger might be a friend and ally well worth cultivating.

"I begin to think you intended me a service—"

"Is that so?" drawled the Sample Sport, with arching brows, an exaggerated amazement in his face.

Rex Pollard struggled to his feet, one hand clinging to the tree, the other reaching out toward Harper as he said:

"Will you take it—as a friend, sir?"

"As half a dozen if you like," laughed Grip-sack Sid, his weapons vanishing as by magic and his fingers closing over the proffered hand. "I didn't think you could hold out long against my blarney. I'm known as the fellow who either gets an order or talks his man into a coffin. But I'll give you credit for being the toughest knot I ever tried to untangle, and admit that I really began to think I'd have to come old Alex over it—yes, sir!"

Rex Pollard bowed gravely, only the ghost of a smile flitting over his pale face at that quip.

"I begin to believe you mean all for the best, Mr. Harper, but I can't change what I said: you did me a cruel wrong when you let that infernal scoundrel go free!"

"Tick wouldn't back you up in the free part," laughed the Sample Sport, opening his grip and producing cigars, one of which Pollard accepted this time. "And I differ with you just as radically on the second item."

"He knows who killed Bailey Thorpe—"

"And was more than ready to make oath on a stack of Bibles that you were the identical slayer," nodded Grip-sack Sid.

"I could have forced the whole truth out of his vile lips!" Rex Pollard muttered, hoarsely, his eyes regaining their savage glow and his impetuous temper rising rapidly.

"If plenty of time and elbow-room was granted you, maybe so," was the calm amendment. "But would you have that? Mind, I'm only going by what I caught with my own ears, and I may be way off the direct route to Truthville. All the same I'm open to gamble on my judgment, and that simmers down to about so-fashion:

"I don't know precisely how you are regarded by the citizens of Round-up, but if they are the average run of their kind, that sulky rascal could and would have fitted a snug loop around your throat if he only dared tell them what he let out here.

"If I hadn't felt so sure of this, I'd have taken you both at your word and ridden into Round-up like a conquering hero with a grip full to overrunning with glory!"

"I still wish you had done so," gloomily muttered Pollard.

"That's because you are still too hot to look at both sides of the shield before declaring its color," nodded the Sample Sport, using his foot to scrape aside a few dried twigs which might possibly cause the dying fire to spread after their departure. "Suppose we take saddle and mog along toward town? I'll guarantee that before the fresh air has fanned your manly brow an hour, you'll begin to see through my specs."

"Did those rascals leave my horse behind?"

"Right over yonder," nodded the Sample Sport. "I reckon they meant it to tote you to town. For, do you know, I've got an idea! Didn't Tick Slater play that fright and tumble just a thought too clumsily?"

"You think—" hesitated Pollard.

"That he was looking for a surprise—yes. That he thought it was the real power behind the throne when I chipped in, and didn't see his mistake until too late to cover his slip."

Pollard caught his breath sharply, the mists seeming to fall from before his wits with those crisp words. It was true! In that light alone could Tick Slater's words and actions be accounted for.

"That's just what you want to find out first," nodded Grip-sack Sid as he reached the edge of the timber and caught the look in those glowing eyes. "The power behind the throne is your first mark. The clumsy tool don't count for a cent."

"And I know right where to put my grip upon him, too!" hoarsely cried the ranch-owner as he secured his horse.

"Well, don't try to shut your hand too quick, partner. Play good old Davy Crockett, then give him a sample of home-brewed justice."

While speaking he was leading the way at a brisk pace toward a slight depression in the level, filled with rank grass, where the outlines of a good horse soon became visible.

But before that point was quite gained, Pollard uttered a warning cry, turning in the saddle to gaze back along the edge of the motte, around which, with savage shouts and curses, three horsemen were just breaking into full gallop.

"Tick Slater and company, by glory!" cried the Sample Sport, turning and leaping up to the level just as the enemy opened fire and sent a miniature storm of lead humming past them. "Shot for shot, and—good boy!" he added, with a reckless laugh as the ranch-owner opened fire, his first shot sending one horse away at a tangent with empty saddle.

His further words, if any, were lost in the swift rattle of his own revolvers.

The enemy seemed demoralized by the quick retribution which had overtaken one of their number, and the remaining twain divided, their snorting animals sheering off in evident fright, with a gait so unsteady as to render anything like accurate marksmanship altogether out of the question.

Perhaps it was just as well for the attacked, for Rex Pollard gave an angry cry, the pistol dropping from his hand as he swayed in the saddle, his arm hanging as though crippled.

But at nearly the same instant Grip-sack Sid saw his target drop to the neck of his horse, plainly wounded if not slain, and with a defiant laugh he turned his attention to the survivor, whom he recognized as Tick Slater.

That precious rascal was wheeling in flight, bending low along the neck of his horse to lessen the risk of being hit, but as Grip-sack Sid took deliberate aim and fired, a muffled howl came back, and in the moonlight Slater could be seen to fling a hurried hand behind him.

"Good-by, Tick!" recklessly laughed the Sample Sport, noting that action. "What with leather and lead you'd ought to be mighty well half-soled by this time. And yet I'm open to lay odds you do your eating without calling for a seat for many a—Hello, partner!"

"It's only a graze, I reckon," said Pollard in answer to that anxious look. "It took the starch out of my arm for the moment, but—"

"A graze that preferred the center to the skin!" grimly nodded Harper, as he gently fingered the wounded shoulder. "Still, no bones are broken, and with a little bandaging you'll be all right until we can hunt up a medical sharp."

Although Pollard persisted that it was but a trifle, Grip-sack Sid forced him to submit to his deft manipulations, first satisfying himself that the bullet had gone clear through the arm, just below the shoulder joint, then plugging up the holes and tightly bandaging the member, after which he improvised a sling to prevent too great motion while riding.

Not until this was done did either give a thought to the enemy, one of whom, Bark Adams, had been slain outright. The others were out of sight, but as both had been wounded, little or nothing was to be feared from them at present.

"We'll leave the fellow here for his mates to pick up, or until we can send a party out from town," gravely decided Grip-sack Sid, as they mounted their horses and moved away from the spot.

"You think we'd better report it, then?"

"Got to," was the decisive reply. "He's the shape of a human being, anyway, and in your fix you can't afford to neglect a single precaution. There is a form of law and order at Round-up?"

"Just about," with a grim nod. "There is a marshal, and a couple of justices. Davidson, the marshal, is a fairly clever fellow, though he is inclined to run with the loudest crowd."

"All the more reason why we'd ought to be the first to sing our song of war and destruction," laughed the Sample Sport. "Reckon you can stand it to touch up a little, partner?"

For answer, Pollard gave his horse free rein, seemingly in no wise inconvenienced by his wound.

But few words were exchanged during the remainder of that ride. Both men seemed to prefer their own thoughts, as was natural enough when all that had happened them that evening was taken into consideration.

When their course was fully decided upon, Grip-sack Sid tacitly left the details to his new-found friend, as being the best informed on Round-up matters, and Rex Pollard was not one to ask suggestions or advice.

In due course the little town was reached, and John Davidson, the "city marshal," was found at his home, just preparing for bed.

Rex Pollard called him out, briefly stating that he and his friend Mr. Sidney Harper, had been attacked by three men, presumably for the purpose of robbery, but who had been beaten off with the loss of one man killed, whom they had left where he fell.

"You'll find me at home, if I'm needed, Davidson," he added.

"Me, too!" nodded the Sample Sport.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"WHO IS SHE?"

"But, gents," stammered the bewildered official, tugging at his patriarchal beard, as he gazed from face to face.

"Good-night, Davidson," curtly interjected Pollard, bringing his wounded arm into view. "I've been hit by the rascals, and must hunt up a doctor. You can manage the case without a crippled man to assist you, I reckon."

Wheeling his horse, the ranchero rode away, Grip-sack Sid keeping close to his side, neither speaking until they were beyond reach of that perplexed gaze.

Then Pollard spoke:

"You meant it, Harper? You'll go home with me?"

"You won't think I'm crowding you?"

"I'll be more than pleased to have you," was the earnest reply, as his sound arm extended to meet with a cordial grasp. "I need some one to talk over this scrape, and I don't know of another man in all Rack-about Range that I would dare to trust as I dare trust you."

Grip-sack Sid laughed softly, a faint trace of malice visible in his strong face and sparkling eyes as he met that gaze.

"The wheel will go round, won't it, partner? But never mind it. I knew you'd grow accustomed to my style, after taking a cool look or two, and before we've played partners a full day, I'm open to lay odds you'll believe you fell in love with me at first sight."

Pollard flushed a trifle, for he was hardly accustomed to being treated after this off-hand fashion, but as he was really beginning to realize the immense service this cool stranger had rendered him, he smothered the feeling and repeated his invitation more formally.

"You'll look up a doctor first, of course?"

"No. I'm not losing any blood, and I've got a man at home who can look after me as well, if not better, than the one doctor this town can afford."

"All right. I'll go with you, of course; what drummer wouldn't?" with a light laugh. "Free board and lodging, but the house'll never know it. Everything goes, and the expense account must show up respectable figures whatever else happens!"

"Then you really are a drummer, or traveling salesman?"

"Representing the best, richest, most extensive house in Dunn's, if you care to look up its standing. And I've got the choicest line of samples—ranging from grave to gay, useful and ornamental, big and little, high and low, common or rare—but I'll open up my grip when we can catch a better light for showing their true beauties off to good advantage," glibly rattled off the other, smiling blandly into the darkly handsome face at his side.

Pollard was silenced if not entirely satisfied, and for a considerable time they rode along in silence, leaving Round-up City far behind them, eventually reaching the Shuttlecock Ranch.

Rule Keeler was prompt to meet and welcome his master, taking his horse, with that resigned by Grip-sack Sid, a single gesture sealing his lips as he noted that bandaged arm.

"Put up the animals first, Rule, then I'll submit to a touch of your surgery," curtly uttered Pollard, leading the way into the house.

Grip-sack Sid quietly made the best possible use of his eyes on entering, but without betraying his real interest to his somewhat pre-occupied host. And not until after Rule Keeler had come with bandages, lint and warm water, deftly attending to the wounded arm, did either man utter words which call for record here.

Then, with cigars, liquor and food spread on the round table between them, Pollard and Harper were left to themselves.

The host ate but sparingly, but Grip-sack Sid proved himself a worthy trencher-knight, for he was sharp-set and the viands were good and fairly well served for a bachelor table.

Then he filled a glass, lit a cigar, leaning back in his easy, cushioned chair, formed mainly from the wide-spreading horns of the native steer, a half-quizzical gleam in his gray eyes as he put the question:

"Well, pardner, who is she?"

Pollard gave a sudden start, his eyes opening widely, but then a rich glow suffused his cheeks as he caught that thinly veiled meaning.

"You mean—"

"That I heartily agree with the worthy sultan who originated that conundrum, though you mustn't think I'm trying to crowd you against your will. Still, there's a woman in the case, and if it isn't too sacred a secret, I'd dearly like to know just what you're willing to tell me about her and her surroundings."

Pollard made no immediate reply, his eyes downcast, his face showing what a strong struggle was going on below the surface.

"Not that I was born with an interrogation point in my mouth, you understand," lazily added the Sample Sport, his half-closed eyes fixed on the wall above him. "But I heard just enough out yonder, thanks to the whole-soled—that's a pun, if you appreciate it, by the way!—Tick Slater, to set my curiosity on edge. And as I've chipped in without stopping to ask about the limit, I'd naturally like to know just the size of the game, to measure my puts accordingly. See?"

"You have earned the right to an answer," slowly said Pollard, only to be cut short by his guest.

"But I prefer to receive it as a favor, partner," his lazy manner vanishing as he leaned forward, elbows supported by the table, his face grave and earnest as he added: "You're a true man or I'm way off. You are in some sore trouble, and I've seen a sample of the enemies you're bucking against. That's enough to rank me on your side, heart, soul, brain and body, with a pair of ready hands to top the stack."

"From what I learned out yonder this evening, I should judge you stand in need of good backing, and though you might find many a better man to give you that, the best I've got in the shop lies at your service. Can I say more than that, Pollard?"

"I wish I could think I really deserve as much," said the young ranchero, his voice far from steady as he reached across the table to grasp that ready hand.

"I'm ready to run the risk if you are," smiled Grip-sack, Sid, his lighter manner regaining the upper hand once more. "I'm a holy terror when I get fairly started, but just now I'm mild as mother's milk. And I carry a filter between my two ears that will retain only what you prefer I should remember."

Pollard flushed afresh at that veiled hint, but he was coming to place an unusual degree of confidence in this glib-tongued stranger, brief as had been their acquaintance. He could see, now, how wisely the Sample Sport had acted in preventing him from pressing Tick Slater to the last extremity, and that knowledge helped win his liking.

"You heard what that villain said about the killing of Bailey Thorpe, of course," he said, finding the words very hard to choose, despite his new-formed resolution.

"I heard him," with a nod. "It entered a little more into details, but really told me nothing new. The story has spread far and wide, as such an affair naturally would."

"Yet you can wonder at my reluctance to speak of it?" bitterly cried the ranch-owner.

"Exactly," was the quiet reply. "For that very reason you ought to take care that your side of the story was spread equally as far and wide, that unprejudiced people might take their choice between the two versions. Now I don't mind admitting that, up to to-night, I looked upon you as really guilty, and—"

"You dare say this to me?"

"Because I'm now your friend," nodded Grip-sack Sid, his gray eyes steadily meeting that angry, suspicious gaze. "Because I want you to down the malicious devils who are trying to run you up a tree. And if you can muzzle that atrocious temper of yours for a week or so, partner, I'll lay big odds that you and I can turn the tables on Tick Slater & Company!"

That frank, open, honest gaze calmed the hot-tempered ranchero far more than words alone could have done, and his flush of rage turned to a blush of shame at having given way to such an outburst.

"You see," he unsteadily explained, "I have been so completely broken up by this sore trouble. My nerves are all on edge, and the least thing seems to turn my blood to fire."

"I *sabe*," nodded Grip-sack Sid, gravely. "And unless you can show up the real rascals before another month of such strain, you'll end it in an insane asylum or by blowing out your own brains. I want to help you, as one honest man should help another. I will help you if I can, but that brings me back to the starting point."

"I can be of little service unless you are willing to trust me entirely. To set to work as one should, I must know just how this ugly situation was brought about. And so—who is she?"

"The daughter of the—of Bailey Thorpe."

"I knew there must be a woman in the case," with a gratified nod. "Now for the tragedy: how near did Tick Slater come to the truth: of course I mean the finding of the body, and that ugly hand-print on his shirt bosom?"

"Close enough to answer. The body was discovered much as he described, and there was a bloody print on his breast. The red hand lacked a thumb. And that is why the howling gang turned first in my direction," huskily added the ranchero.

"And you proved a distinct alibi?"

"By four men, either of whom stands equal to any one in the land."

"There was no attempt made to compare another print made in public by your left hand, with that mark on Thorpe?"

Pollard shook his head negatively.

"The mark was blurred to a certain extent. And when I proved that it was impossible for me to have been at the spot that night, the matter was dropped—to keep cropping up eternally ever since!"

"Who seemed to make the most stir in trying to solve the matter?"

"The brother and nephew of the old gentleman."

Grip-sack Sid sat in silence for a brief space, his brows contracted and his gray eyes gazing steadily at vacancy. Then he roused up, his manner and tone altering as he gently asked:

"And the lady? She did not join in with the rest? She never thought it possible you could be the guilty being?"

Pollard flushed, then turned pale, but manfully spoke up:

"Not then—not at first. God bless her! she openly declared that I was not the man—she knew I was innocent!"

"Then you have cause to fear her opinion has altered since?"

"I don't know," despondently, his head drooping. "I have never had a chance to talk with

her after those first few days. I fear she is beginning to doubt—How can she help it?"

"She does not doubt—if she was ever in love with you," slowly uttered Grip-sack Sid, like one rather doubtful of his footing. "I'd be lying if I was to say I doubted your being over head and ears in love with her."

"I was, I am so still."

"And the lady?" softly persisted the Sample Sport. "She knew you loved her? She was—May I ask it, partner, as a friend?"

"She had promised to marry me. I asked her father for permission, and that brought on the quarrel—for I like a fool let his harsh words work me up. And that fact told hard against me when the black morning came. There were those who had heard me swear that I'd have my bride if I had to wade through a river of blood to win her."

"Among those who brought out this threat—was there one who had tried to win the young lady for himself?"

Pollard shook his head in negation.

"But there *was* a would-be lover?"

"Lee Chandler, among others—curse him!"

"What and who is Lee Chandler?"

"A gambler, sport, blackleg, bully; chief of Round-up some call him."

"Struck oil, or I'm a traveling fraud!" cried Harper, exultantly. "Lee Chandler's our game, for long odds!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PENALTY OF A MISTAKE.

AS Lee Chandler sprung away from the edge of the timber in the direction where he had left his horse in hiding, he found space enough between his savage oaths of rage and chagrin to sound a sharp whistle.

A quick neigh came in answer, and his well-trained horse rose to its feet in prompt obedience to the signal, hobbling forward as though badly crippled, thanks to the knotted reins about its leg, which Chandler had forgotten.

At first glance the Round-up Sharp fancied some unlucky accident had happened, just when he felt that he needed the creature most, but a flash of memory came back to him as that hobble suddenly vanished, the loosely tied reins shaking free.

"Good boy!" he muttered, as he leaped into the saddle and turned the head of his horse toward the quarter from whence the rattle of firearms had proceeded. "If I had even one man as true and trusty as you are, I'd back the world down!"

Yet that belief did not induce him to spare the spurs, and his horse darted swiftly away toward the trail in which Rex Pollard had been captured by Tick Slater and his mates earlier in the evening.

"Did he nip him? Did he take him to that grove? Did he play the double idiot and let the devil have a chance to pull a gun?"

Too furious for clear thought or any positive reasoning, the gambler dashed ahead, guided by memory alone, for after that first spirited rattle of shots, all had grown still.

His eyes were straining hard to catch the earliest possible glimpse of mortal being, be it friend or foe, and he had hardly crossed the trail so often alluded to, before he caught sight of a dim, uncertain shadow gliding across the plain far ahead.

"A rider—who?" he asked himself, involuntarily tightening the reins, uncertain whether it would be best to follow it, or to keep directly on to the second motte.

His doubts were very short lived, and veering a little to the right in order to save ground in the end, Chandler pricked his steed on with vicious energy.

"It's the quickest way!" he muttered to himself. "If Pollard got the best of the racket, that's the surest lead. And if it should chance to be the fellow himself!"

Chandler's hand dropped to his revolver at the thought, and there was an ugly significance to the gesture.

Slowly but surely the angle lessened, for though Chandler rode with loose rein and reddened spur, the horse ahead was a good one and either terribly frightened or else being mercilessly urged on by its rider.

"Is it human or beast?" gratingly cried Chandler, as he drew close enough to note how curiously, for a man, the rider ahead carried himself. "Looks like a panther—but it's a man, easy enough!"

From crouching far forward, almost lying along the horse's neck, the fugitive rose erect and apparently turned his face toward the oncoming stranger. It seemed as though he had just now noticed him, probably through catching the sound of other trampling hoofs, for Lee Chandler now noticed him using whip or reins to madly lash the horse into renewed speed.

"Halt!" the Round-up Sport cried out sharply. "Pull up, or I'll riddle you from head to heels!"

If anything, this fierce challenge caused the fugitive to renew his efforts, and for a brief space his jaded animal fairly held its own with the noble steed on its track. And even as Lee Chandler was debating the advisability of try-

ing a flying shot in hopes of killing or crippling the horse, he made a discovery.

"Slater, by smoke!" he ejaculated, as faint oaths and curses came floating back to his keen ears. "The little game's busted wide open!"

Up rose his pistol hand, and if he could have caught instant aim Tick Slater might easily have paid the penalty of his mistake by eating lead. But before that aim could be made sure, second thoughts made Chandler lower his hand and lift his voice:

"Slater! hold up, you infernal idiot!"

Instead, the thoroughly frightened rascal struggled still harder to escape from that rider, who he firmly believed must be Grip-sack Sid, the Sample Sport.

"Slater, don't you know me?" and the pursuer lifted his notes still higher. "'Tis I—Lee Chandler, your friend. Pull up, you fool, or I'll drive a blue pill clean through you!"

Either the threat or the mention of that name produced the desired effect, and the fugitive slackened his pace, rolling out of the saddle almost before his panting steed had dropped down to a walk.

"Don't—I'm clean butchered a'ready, boss!" the miserable cur groaned, holding up a deprecatory hand as the Round-up Sharp drew near. "They ain't a hull bone in the body o' me, an' I'm riddled clean all over wuss then a sifter, an' you never—"

Lee Chandler cut him short, leaping to the ground and gripping the wretch by the throat, shaking him much as a terrier might shake a rat.

"Where is he? How did you bungle so badly? What set you to running off this fashion? Out with it, curse you for a blundering cur!"

"Ef you—don't choke—"

Lee Chandler flung the gasping rascal from him.

He made a hasty calculation in his mind, and joining the lapse of time to the distance they were from the motte where the affray had undoubtedly taken place, he knew that it was now too late to retrieve the mistake made by his tools, whatever that might prove to be.

That knowledge helped restore something of his usual coolness, and holding his judgment in reserve, he set about finding out just what had transpired.

"Where are you hurt, Slater?"

"All over—wuss luck!" groaned that unhappy wretch, rolling over upon his face before attempting to arise, the action showing the nature of his wound.

Grip-sack Sid had indeed left his mark on Tick Slater, and it would have been much deeper only for the lead having to first force its way through the hide-covered cantle of his saddle, then tearing a ragged slit through several inches of toughened flesh.

"Who shot you? What of the game I sent you after?"

Sore and bruised though he was, that cold, crisp tone warned Tick Slater against losing more time in idle lamentations, and in as few words as possible he sketched the main facts of his exploit.

"I told you distinctly to take him to the left of the trail. Why did you take him directly opposite?" sternly demanded the gambler, his blue eyes winning a dangerous glitter.

"Good Lawd! *didn't* I take the left side?" gasped Slater.

"Counting from this end, yes, but we were in town when I told you. Catch up your horse and we'll take a look that way, if only to see what came of the boys," grimly uttered Chandler, setting the example himself.

"They was two, an' I don't know but a dozen or—"

"Don't care if there were a thousand," sharply interjected the Prince of Round-up. "Mount, or I'll lay you out too cold for skinning!"

With a smothered groan Tick Slater obeyed, bending far forward to relieve the pressure where it was most painful, suffering severely yet fearing to refuse lest still worse befall.

Lee Chandler had no mercy on the miserable wretch, keeping both horses at a fast trot, and at the same time questioning Tick Slater closely in regard to the stranger who had so thoroughly defeated his long-cherished schemes.

After this fashion little more than half the distance to the timber island was crossed, when Chandler abruptly drew rein, Tick Slater shooting ahead with a muffled howl of terror, as a faint hail came to their ears from out the cover of a low swale to the left.

"Show your colors or I'll burn powder!" sharply cried Chandler, wheeling and lifting the head of his mount as a partial cover for his own person, revolver in readiness for hot work.

"Don't shoot—it's me—Dan West, boss!"

The voice was husky but distinct enough for recognition, and Tick Slater drew rein with a little cry of pleasure.

"Then you didn't ketch it fer keeps, pard?" he called out as he saw a figure come slowly out from cover, leading a horse behind him.

"Ketched it hard a-plenty—double over, wuss luck!"

"An' Bark? He ain't with ye, nuther?"

"Ef he wasn't throwed cold fust off I'm mighty out," gloomily uttered West, coming to

a pause in front of the gambler, with a cowed expression. "You seed him take a tumble ef you wasn't too bad skeered to see anythin' but a hole you wanted to run through, durn ye!"

"You can sit your horse, West?" asked Chandler. "If you have to do it to dodge a noose, I mean?"

"I kin ride, but it makes me mighty fainty, boss."

"It's a ground-hog case, the way matters have panned out," was the grim addition. "Thanks to an infernal idiot who can't tell left from right, the whole game has fizzled. It'd serve you right, Tick Slater, if I were to lift your roof, but I'll give you a show to play even. Can I trust you?"

Both rascals hastily replied in the affirmative, and Chandler seemed inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt.

"You know what I told you about that hole in the hills, Slater. Go there as quick as you can, and lay low until I send word or the storm blows over. It all depends on what course Pollard takes. I'll let you know in time if it has to be a hot run, although you've played the devil and all with my plans."

Only too glad to escape with such ease, Slater wheeled his horse and rode off in company with Dan West, while Chandler kept on in the direction of the timber island.

Grimly silent, though his evil brain was very busy during the interval, the Round-up Sharp gained the motto, pistol in readiness for instant use in case Rex Pollard and his unknown friend should be in ambush waiting for the two knaves to come back in quest of their fallen mate. But he saw no signs of such an intention, and satisfied that the timber island was deserted, Chandler quickly found where Bark Adams was lying, a corpse.

"He'll never tell tales out of school, anyway!" grimly muttered the gambler, mounting once more and riding away at a rapid pace, keeping clear of the trail yet taking a tolerably direct course for town.

Busy though his brain was, dark and troubled his thoughts, Lee Chandler kept his outward senses on the keen alert as he drew nearer to Round-up City. And just as he came into full view of the little town he realized the wisdom of his precautions, for a considerable body of mounted men were just on the point of leaving the place.

"It's Davidson and a posse!" muttered the sharp, veering yet a little more to the right and passing rapidly down a depression which shut off all view from town and the course which the horsemen would be most likely to take in case his idea was the correct one. "Then Pollard did report the racket! I'd give a pretty penny to know just what sort of fairy tale he trumped up!"

Secure in the gloom, Chandler drew rein and waited until the posse had passed beyond all chance of seeing him, then he resumed his journey and entered town from an almost opposite direction.

He was provided with a plausible explanation in case he met any curious person, friend or enemy, but no such encounter took place before he gained the little stable in which he frequently kept his horse.

Leaving the animal there with ample provisions after his hard night's work, Chandler hastened around to the front of the big building known for many a mile around as "The Albambra."

Just as he gained the door a loud, coarse voice yelled out:

"I'm a wolf! An' I kin jest nat'ally chaw up any critter as ever wore hide, ha'r, horns, huff or taller!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE POWER OF MIND OVER MATTER.

A REMARKABLY correct imitation of the howling bark of the big timber wolf followed his reckless challenge, and the speaker leaped high enough into the air to rattle his heels thrice together before they again touched the floor, the shock of that descent causing the glassware behind the bar to rattle and clink musically.

He was a tall, athletic fellow, all bone and muscle, looking to the full as awkward a customer to handle as his sweeping challenge implied.

His garb was that of a cowboy, fresh from the saddle, from home-made hat of sun-cured rawhide, to high-heeled boots with huge spurs jingling with his every motion.

And now he stood alert, one hand at each hip where hung suspended a brace of navy revolvers, his bloodshot eyes roving defiantly about, his fiery red hair, mustaches and full beard glowing vividly in the clear lamplight.

Lee Chandler took in the scene at a glance, and with a single pantherish leap he crossed the space dividing them, his left hand falling heavily upon one of those broad shoulders, the fingers fairly sinking into the solid flesh.

The bully wheeled swiftly, one hand clinched as that arm rose to break that vise-like grip, the other whipping forth a revolver, a venomous oath rising in his throat—to stick there unuttered as the Round-up Sharp caught his eyes with a cold gaze.

"You couldn't chaw up a sick kitten, Raw-beef," contemptuously uttered Chandler, his hand empty as it rose before the fiery face, forefinger extended to deliberately strike first one side then the other of that beacon-like nose.

To nearly all who witnessed this bold action, death seemed certain to overtake the Prince of Round-up, since his proverbial quickness of action could not prevent that drawn revolver from sending a bullet through his body, since the muzzle almost touched it now. But instead of pulling trigger, the bully tremblingly returned his weapon to its holster, his voice low and unsteady as he made meek reply:

"Not ef you say I couldn't, boss."

"You're a drunken beat, William."

"Reckon I must be, boss, or you wouldn't say so," in the same curiously cowed tones, his florid skin blanching as much as fear could whiten it.

"You were born a cowardly cur, Raw-beef Bill, and you've grown worse with each day of your life," pitilessly persisted Chandler, seeming to find balm for his recent defeat in thoroughly humiliating this desperado before that wondering assemblage.

"Ef you say it, boss."

"I do say it, Bill Crumple, but you needn't take any other person's word for it without asking them to show cause," laughed the gambler, his manner swiftly changing, one hand slipping through the still trembling arm of the cowboy and turning him toward the bar. "We'll have a drink in memory of good old times, and then you're going to bed. For you're dangerously near being drunk, old fellow."

"I reckon mebbe I be, boss," still with that oddly mechanical tone of voice, that not even the little ripple of laughter and applause which broke from the witnesses of this really marvelous exhibition of the power of mind over matter could alter.

"My particular, please," with a nod toward the barkeeper. "Please join us, gentlemen. This is an old friend of mine, just in from the range, I take it, William Crumple by name. He made a little mistake in the house, just now, but was kind enough to listen to reason from an old pard. Just his good nature, bear in mind, so don't let any love of fun hinder your picking him out when a wild and warlike mood happens to fasten on any one of you. I'll back him up with rocks against any fun-loving sport inside Rack-about Range."

At that unqualified indorsement, Raw-beef Bill grew a trifle more life-like, though his hand was still a bit unsteady as he lifted a glass to his lips. And meekly, ludicrously like a little dog in his timidly fawning manner, he followed Lee Chandler out of the saloon into the night, without a question as to where he was being taken.

Nor did the Round-up Sharp utter a word or vouchsafe him a look until pausing before a neatly-painted frame building up the street, over the door of which shone a brightly-gilded sign.

"This is my office, Crumple, and though it doesn't loom up quite so big and attractive as the Albambra, I reckon you'll find it cozy enough inside. And a mighty sight healthier for a howling wolf of your gay and festive nature, Raw-beef!"

An inarticulate murmur was the only reply, and unlocking the door, Chandler motioned the cowed bully to enter before him. He followed close at his heels, striking a match as he closed and locked the door, quickly lighting an oil lamp in a bracket overhanging a plain desk at one end of the room.

Crumple removed his rude hat and meekly sunk into the seat indicated by a nod from Chandler, who turned to unlock a heavy safe near the desk, taking therefrom a box of cigars, a flask of liquor and a couple of glasses, all of which he placed on a small table.

"Help yourself, Bill," he said, as he dropped into a chair opposite the cowboy. "Brace up, man alive!" with a touch of irritation in his tones. "I had to call you down, back yonder, for I own the place and can't afford to have it all upset by such a racket as you were trying to set a-going."

"Ef I'd on'y knowed it, boss, be mighty sure I wouldn't 'a' hysted the tail o' me like the way I did. But it come down—yes it did!"

"As many another has been furred before you, Bill," laughed the gambler, grimly, clearly not feeling it necessary to wear his usual polite mask before this ruffian. "Never eat out your heart over it. I can and will set you right before the crowd with a single word. That is, if you're really anything like the tough nut you were of old?"

"You're the only man livin' that wouldn't 'a' drapped cold fer the likes o' that back ye", boss! An'—I'm shiverin' yit to think how mighty nigh I was to lettin' off the ole gun—at you, boss!"

There was no pretense in that speech or manner. Crumple was full of awe such as no other man on earth could arouse in his reckless, crime-hardened heart.

"Let it pass, Bill," curtly nodded the Round-up Sharp, filling both glasses and twirling his around between thumb and finger as he gazed

keenly, searchingly into that weather-beaten face. "You are still on the loose, ready to pick up a neat penny if a friend should direct your gaze in the proper direction?"

"I'm open fer any job you kin set up fer my doin', boss," with a more natural tone and manner. "Jest say the word an' I'll go fer it bigger'n a wolf!"

"It's been a right smart while since we last met up with each other," said Chandler, in a musing tone. "You must have made quite a number of new acquaintances during that interval, Raw-beef?"

The cowboy nodded assent, a slightly bewildered expression coming into his eyes as he vainly tried to catch the drift of that question.

"Among them all can you remember a fellow who called himself Sidney Harper, or Grip-sack Sid, or the Sample Sport? Take time to think before you answer, Crumple."

The cowboy obeyed, but in the end he shook his head negatively.

"Ef ever I did, it's slipped my box, boss. Mebbe it mought freshen up things a bit ef you could sorter draw his looks, like."

"Unfortunately I haven't his likeness, nor have I ever met the fellow myself," frowned Chandler; "but as near as I can make out, this is about how he figures up."

He described Grip-sack Sid as nearly as possible after the idea gleaned from Tick Slater, though it would hardly have been recognized by the original as intended for himself. But that was Slater's fault, not the gambler's.

Again Bill Crumple racked his memory, and again he was forced to shake his head, reluctantly admitting:

"I cain't place him fer the life o' me, boss, but mebbe a'ter a sleep I kin pin the critter down."

"Never mind," throwing off his air of anxiety. "I dare say I'll have a chance soon to point the gentleman out to you in person. By the way, Raw-beef, your hands still shake. Surely bad whisky hasn't robbed you of all your old-time nerve?"

"I cain't git over comin' so turrible nigh drillin' you, boss."

"Then you're still as good a chief as when I first knew you?"

"Ef you've got a bitter enemy, boss, p'int him out an' I'll let you answer that question fer your own self," was the grim response.

"Say I have such an enemy," slowly uttered Chandler, trying to read the face before him. "Say I have good reasons for not wanting to show my hand openly in the affair, but am ready to pay big money to the friend who puts that enemy out of the way, what would you say?"

"I'd say, show me the critter an' I'll fit him fer a coffin, too mighty quick, boss!" was the instant response.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN AMATEUR MAN OF MAGIC.

THERE was some little excitement in Round-up City the next morning when it became generally known that an attempt had been made at highway robbery and murder, ending in the death of one of the daring footpads; but said interest was far less than might have been expected, and not nearly so long-lived.

The citizens of Round-up had something else to talk about, and if a vote had been taken that day as to the most popular being inside the limits of Rack-about Range, that generous-hearted, public-spirited gentleman, Lee Chandler, would have led the poll a hundred to one over all other candidates combined.

To him Round-up City owed the new "Opera House." Through his enterprise and liberality they were entitled to put on metropolitan airs, since no other city between Denver and San Francisco could boast of or afford to pay for such a glorious, grand and costly attraction as was that very evening to christen the new Opera House.

So the more enthusiastic of the citizens never tired of saying, and where everybody seemed to fully agree, there could be no room left for doubt.

"But how many is there in the troupe?" one man ventured to ask.

"Tain't so much the many as it is the bigness, ye want to know," loftily nodded the blower of fame's trumpet. "Thar's the Perfessor King: he weighs a solid ton when ye count him up fer smart. Thar's the Lodge-e-tanny: she—waal, of she don't split Round up wide open an' never faze a ha'r, I'll swaller a bull 'bout knockin' off its horns or tyin' up its tail—waal I jest will, pardner!"

Taking all this into consideration, therefore, it is not so much to be wondered at that the fate of Bark Adams cast scarcely a ripple over the surface of Round-up society, or that, lacking a formal inquest, his body was packed in a dry-goods box, and stowed away for future reference.

Rex Pollard and his new-found friend, Sidney Harper, may have held themselves in readiness to obey any sign from the legal powers, but as none such was given, they were not visible in town that day.

Long before the announced hour for opening the "Opera House," a goodly crowd of cowboys,

miners, gentlemen of leisure, and numerous other more or less useful professions had collected before the building to be christened, and but for the gallant Chandler, there would have been scant accommodations left for the ladies and such of the ranch-owners as might come in later.

The Prince of Round-up had reserved a number of seats, and after the first few moments this fact became generally recognized by the good-natured gang, each and every one of whom became voluntarily guards from that time henceforward.

"Them's fer yer betters, Johnny! Spread yerself out wider an' don't take up so much room in the middle! Come cut, or a rope'll fetch ye!"

It was a noisy, free-and-easy assemblage, but so ready to be pleased that the "show" must be wretched indeed not to meet with their approval. It was something out of the ordinary line, and the burly fellows were like overgrown children.

As the house gradually filled, each arrival from outside the town limits was greeted characteristically, according to the brand or title of the ranch, and many were the queer cries and sounds thus brought into existence.

But when a tall, graceful couple entered the building, preceded by Lee Chandler in person, showing them to the best among the seats reserved, there was a touch of reverence in the cheer which followed recognition, due almost as much to the beauty of the lady as to the memory of her foully murdered father.

Imo Thorpe made no sign, unless it was by shrinking from such public recognition as she kept her face covered by a thick veil; but there was a touch of defiant resentment in the stiff bow which Will Thorpe gave as his fearless blue eyes swept around the assemblage.

Shortly after this arrival, a bell tinkled and the drop ascended, revealing Professor King in evening dress, wand in hand, smiling blandly as he bowed and bowed again, patiently waiting for the tumultuous storm of greeting to exhaust itself.

As soon as he could make himself heard without seriously risking his voice, the professor made a neat little speech for himself, giving his audience a faint idea of what the evening held in store for them. And then, at a wave of his ebony wand, the glorious being whom the wide majority of citizens had individualized as "Lodge-e-tanny," but whom Professor King introduced as "La Gitana," came gracefully forward to play her part in the evening's entertainment.

In keeping with her stage-name, La Gitana was dressed after the traditionally accepted Gypsy costume, which admirably suited her raven hair, jetty eyes, brunette complexion and full red lips.

Her face was boldly handsome, her figure superbly proportioned, her smile wondrously attractive to the great majority of the audience, and from the wild, prolonged greeting she received, there could be no doubt that—to use the vulgate—La Gitana had "bit 'em hard!"

Among the loudest, most enthusiastic of all was Raw-beef Bill, the self-styled "wolf of the range" whom Lee Chandler had so curiously cowed the night before in the Alhambra.

Crumple sat in the front row of seats, just behind the modest orchestra, and his towering figure, his marvelously red hair, formed a conspicuous beacon.

As the quickest method of quelling that storm the professor at once plunged into his work, aided by La Gitana, the couple showing some ordinary feats of legerdemain, but which seemed to fairly stupefy the unsophisticated cowboys and miners.

Now and then a wild cheer would burst forth as if involuntarily, and occasionally Raw-beef Bill would let his growing admiration for La Gitana break bounds, but as a rule the performance was permitted to go on without interruption.

As a grateful interlude, as well as to permit him to arrange his more pretentious efforts, the professor withdrew from the stage, leaving La Gitana to play solo.

The orchestra struck up afresh, and "the Gypsy" gave a specimen of terpsichorean skill and abandon which literally brought down the house, and thoroughly completed her conquest of Raw-beef Bill.

From that time on, her slightest action was enthusiastically applauded by the enamored cowboy, his actions becoming so demonstrative that more than once the two performers interchanged whispers and looks of growing annoyance.

After a few specimens of "second sight," such as are familiar to all patrons of this class of entertainments, Professor King approached the footlights with a bland smile on his face.

"Ladies and gentlemen: In the marvelous feats which La Gitana has kindly consented to next give, she requires the kindly assistance of a strong, cool, steady-nerved man who is ready to earn a liberal reward at the expense of a few minutes of his leisure time. If any well-known member of your gracious company will be so kind—"

"I'm your persim, Profess!" cried Bill Crumple, as those magnetic eyes rested on his fiery countenance and—was La Gitana actually winking at him?

Without waiting for the professor to conclude his speech, or giving any other in the assembly a chance to accept the offer, Raw-beef Bill cleared the railing which protected the orchestra at a bound, giving his rawhide bat a backward toss into the audience as he alighted.

"Hyar's your honey, boss, an' you, ma'am," bowing low before La Gitana. "I al'ays knowed I was cut out fer somethin' tonier than a cow-puncher, an' this is jest the sort o' job I've bin lookin' fer."

"You are a very strong man, my dear sir?" smiled La Gitana, gliding forward and passing her dusky hands over his swelling muscles.

"I kin pick a bull up by the tail an' sling him fuder then the next best man kin throw a rat, ma'am," modestly declared Crumple.

"Is it so, indeed?" shrinking back as though stricken with sudden awe, her big black eyes glancing admiringly over his stalwart dimensions. "Then I fear you will ask such high reward that—"

"Way up, ma'am, but sech as you kin pay an' never miss the losin' of it the minnit a'ter," grinned Raw-beef, drawing a sleeve across his bearded lips in anticipation. "Jest one smack o' the lips, honey, an' I'll do all the work in the barg'in—bet I jest will!"

An ugly muttering ran through the audience, but La Gitana only smiled the more bewilderingly as she held out her right hand, saying:

"A kiss, senor? Will you take your pay in advance?"

"Won't I?" eagerly cried Raw-beef Bill, clasping her hand and—

A wild, choking howl of bewildered rage burst from his lips, for as if by magic some terrible power fairly thrashed him about the stage, despite his great strength. And with his every muscle racked by acute pains, he was lifted clear off his feet and tossed headlong over the footlights!

CHAPTER XXII.

"WHO KILLED BAILEY THORPE?"

EVEN as the big cowboy went flying into the orchestra, a confused tangle of legs and arms, the curtain swiftly descended and shut the performers out of sight.

The act was performed so quickly, and all was ended so abruptly, that the audience had time only for that one warning murmur before it was finished.

But as Raw-beef Bill, spluttering curses and vicious threats, partly lifted himself up from where he had fallen, whipping out a revolver and sending a shot through the drop, a hoarse, ugly roar came from the excited audience and weapons began to appear in scores of hands.

"Hold!" came a clear, stern voice as Lee Chandler sprang down the aisle and leaped over the orchestra railing, one heavy foot pinning the cursing cowboy to the floor, an open hand commanding the audience. "Keep your seats, gentlemen, or deal with me instead of this drunken fool! I'll see that he creates no further disturbance."

"Hurrah fer the Prince o' Round-up!"

"He's the dandy, let it be Raw-beef or b'iled liver!"

"Order, gentlemen!" sternly added Chandler.

"There are ladies present, please bear in mind."

Instantly silence reigned, and removing his foot from the cowboy, Chandler bent over him for an instant, seemingly whispering a word into his ear.

Without a word, Raw-beef Bill staggered to his feet and with downcast eyes followed his master over the rail, up the aisle and out of the building, paying not the slightest attention to the low laughs, the subdued taunts and comments which poured upon him from every direction.

The orchestra struck up, and after a short prelude the curtain rolled up, revealing La Gitana smiling and bowing near the footlights.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she began, her deep, mellow voice betraying no uneasiness or ill effects of that curious experience. "It takes all sorts of people to make up a world, and people in our profession are early taught how best to treat the rougher, cruder elements. The gentleman of the auburn locks—to treat the poor fellow poetically!—yearned for life behind the footlights, and as the easiest method of effecting a cure, and at the same time getting rid of a patient who might possibly give trouble as well as annoyance, I consented to act as his physician."

"You witnessed the treatment. You now enjoy the results. And, with many apologies for departing from the regular programme, I thank you!"

Amidst a storm of enthusiastic applause, La Gitana made her exit, to give place to Professor King, who briefly stated that the second part of their entertainment would consist of the magic lantern, with many brilliant views of world-wide as well as of local interest.

The curtain descended, to reascend shortly afterward, showing a white screen drawn across the center of the stage. La Gitana stood at one side with a long wand in her hand, garbed in simple black unrelieved by white or any trace of

color. Then the lights went out, casting the room in almost complete darkness, as the lamps to the rear were simultaneously turned down low.

A big circle of dim light suddenly appeared in the center of the curtain, followed in deliberate succession by a number of really creditable views of foreign buildings of note, interspersed with faces of dead or still living statesmen.

In brief, it was an ordinary exhibition of the magic lantern, with the deep, musical voice of the almost invisible La Gitana explaining the meaning or name attached to each representation.

Simple as it was, it was something new to the great majority of the assembly, and hardly a sound broke the spell from the outer side of the footlights, until after La Gitana announced a change of subjects which she trusted would be fully appreciated, since the views now to be presented for their consideration had been prepared expressly for that enterprising city, and had never before been displayed to an audience.

Slowly the head and mammoth horns of a native steer grew visible on the curtain, and the cheer which greeted the "long-horn" seemed a guarantee of complete success.

Then the figure of a horse, with cowboy in the act of mounting, took the place of the steer's head. For a single breath silence reigned, then a chorus of laughter rung out, interspersed with crisp comments and criticisms more truthful than approving; for the artist had drawn the horse with an English pad saddle, the short stirrup leathers set far in front of the center, ending in tiny iron stirrups; in brief, the picture of a horse rigged for showing off in Park or Row, but ludicrously different from anything ever witnessed on the cattle range.

"Look at the pancake for a seat, will ye?"

"An' the finger-ring fer his big toe!"

"D'ye moind the crooper split up the brist av 'im to hould the double reins, now?"

"Holy smoke! ef the puncher hain't got his chaps on hind side afore!"

Other equally pertinent comments were half-drowned by the wild yells of mirth and ridicule, and La Gitana sharply stamped with her foot on the floor as a signal for the professor to shift the obnoxious scene for one which might meet with better favor.

Obedience was prompt enough, but before La Gitana could begin her regular comments, the audience once more took the case into their own hands, though as yet all in perfect good humor.

On this field they were at home, and the slightest blunder in detail caught their critical eyes and met with mirthful condemnation.

This scene showed the supposed cowboy in the saddle, ready to start in pursuit of the "long-horn," but he sat his pad saddle like a jockey waiting for the start, instead of standing naturally in the stirrups as a cowboy should.

Warned by her earlier experience, La Gitana gave them less time for criticism, though she began to feel that matters were going from bad to worse, though it was all in high good humor so far as the audience were concerned.

Again the scene shifted, now showing the cowboy in hot chase of the fugitive steer, swinging his lasso in the act of making his cast.

"Ow-wow! the dainty dairlin!" cried the Irish cow-puncher in mock ecstasy. "Will ye luck at that, now! Sure the loikes av 'him don't nade the hilp av a saddle-horn to stan' the pluck. Will he take the loosh ind in the taath av 'im, I dunno?"

La Gitana could not help laughing aloud at that comical air of awed curiosity, but she managed to give the signal for the next slide, showing the steer lassoed, but with the loop low down around its throat, and the horse turning to the right instead of to the left as it braced to resist the coming shock, its gallant rider holding the end of the lariat wrapped about his right hand and wrist!

Half frightened by the roar of mirth and volleying criticisms by which the audience greeted this scene, scores of voices calling attention to each violation of custom, La Gitana dropped her wand and slipped behind the scenes, doubtless to warn her unconscious companion in exhibition to change his ground for one less familiar while the chance was yet open to them.

Still that gayly colored picture remained on the darkened curtain without change, and even the boisterous cowboys were growing eager for fresh matter to criticize.

Minute after minute passed without a change, and from laughing and cheering, the rougher element turned to giving shrill whistles and cat-calls, while the more orderly portion interchanged whispered wonders if something unforeseen had not taken place behind the scenes.

Just in time to head off a self-appointed committee of cowboys to investigate, the picture vanished and another appeared, to be greeted with a low murmur far different from the reception given those preceding it.

It showed a man on horseback, the outlines slowly growing more and more distinct until only the human face itself lacked perfect delineation.

The figure was stalwart and erect in the saddle, which was of the regulation "range" type, with high horn and cantle, with stirrups of bent

wood, covered with leather shields and sweat-guards, hung directly under the center of the rider as he stood gracefully erect.

All other details were in perfect keeping as viewed by the cowboy eye; no double reins, the single pair being hung to the lower arms of the powerful curb; no martingales or breast-strap or crupper, but with the broad double cinch by means of which the saddle is kept in place, without danger of slipping too far forward or too far back, no matter what the strain placed upon it.

Imo Thorpe gave a quick gasp, a hand closing spasmodically upon the arm of her cousin as— Did she recognize that manly figure?

How strangely it reminded her of her poor father! If only the face would grow plainer!

Even as that wild fancy flashed through her mind, the slide shifted for another, likewise the figure of a horseman, but this time full face to the audience, instead of in profile, though, as before, the human face was hidden from the audience, though from a very different cause.

The horse was plainly the same, and more than Imo Thorpe appeared to recognize something familiar in its outlines. The rider was the same, but now one hand was flung up, the body was bending backward as if in the act of falling, and on the white bosom showed a dark red blotch.

Will Thorpe threw an arm about the waist of his trembling, unnerved cousin, his own face blanching, his own eyes catching something of the horror that filled hers, though with a tinge of hot anger in them.

Swiftly the scene shifted, to show another, even more startling: that of a human figure lying on the ground as if in death-agony, while another figure knelt by its side, one hand pressed upon the murdered horseman's bosom, the other uplifted and gripping a bared knife.

With a panting breath Imo Thorpe turned away her face, burying it in the bosom of her cousin. Only for that the angered youth would have sprung to his feet in hot denunciation of that too realistic exhibition.

For he, in common with fully one-half of that audience, felt sure they were gazing upon a pictorial representation of the Bailey Thorpe tragedy.

The growing murmur proved this, but before any positive action could be taken, that gruesome scene vanished and gave place to another.

The murdered man still lay where he had fallen, with face turned upward, his limbs awkwardly contorted, as if from a bitter if brief death-agony.

The assassin had vanished, leaving his victim alone.

And now, as ever before, the figure lay so as to keep its face hidden from view of the audience.

"Take me away, Will!" gasped Imo Thorpe, shivering with a mental agony far more intense than any purely physical torture.

"It is an infernal outrage!" hoarsely cried the young man, rising to his feet as he supported that shivering figure in his arms. "And the vile author of it shall answer to me with his life!"

Yet he could not turn his fascinated gaze from the dimly visible curtain, for the figure faded away, and he longed even while dreading to know what would follow next.

There was a slightly longer delay at that point, which might have been caused by the few cries of reproof and even threats coming from among the close-crowded ranks of the cowboys.

But then a dim, indistinct shadow stole into the circle of light, for the first few moments puzzling even the keener eyes present to interpret it.

Little by little the outlines came out as the light increased, finally shooting out clear and distinct, a mutilated left hand lacking the thumb, and it showed a dull, sickly red.

Then curving around it appeared the blood red letters:

"WHO KILLED BAILEY THORPE?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

As those lurid letters, asking a scarcely less bloody question, flashed upon the curtain in a semicircle above and on each side of that thumbless left hand, an instant hush fell upon the audience.

The eyes of many who knew the Thorpe family, and were aware of the fact that at least two of the murdered ranchero's relatives were in attendance, turned in that direction, and dull, dim though the light was, those nearest Imo Thorpe could catch a glimpse of her ghastly pale countenance as she lay half-swooning in the nervous arms of her Cousin Will.

Then—from just whose lips no one was ever found to tell, a name was shrilly pronounced: the name of Rex Pollard.

At that the uproar broke forth. At that Imo Thorpe lifted her head and turned her face toward the stage, just in time to catch a full com-

prehension of that terribly significant question, before it faded out to be instantly replaced by the clear, distinct, lifelike picture of the very person whose name was now ringing through the hall, spreading from lip to lip.

"Pollard! Pollard! Rex Pollard!"

With a wild, choking cry the poor girl swooned outright, and bearing her over one arm, Will Thorpe fiercely strove to fight his way out of the building to the fresh air of night.

"Back, you devils!" he hoarsely cried, shaking a clinched fist in mid-air as he entered the aisle. "Make way—she's dying for lack of fresh air! Make way, or I'll—"

The outer door was flung wide, and with a savage cry of rage Rex Pollard himself sent a pistol-bullet snapping through the screen, leaving its mark directly between the eyes of his own likeness.

And blinded by his intense anger, the athletic master of the Shuttlecock Ranch plunged down the aisle, forgetting his wounded arm, using clinched fist and clubbed pistol to the more speedily clear the way.

"Fair play, gents!" echoed a clear, manly voice, as its owner followed the ranch-owner, with cool brain and ready arms warding off many a stroke that might otherwise have brought Rex Pollard to a halt in his mad rush to solve the full meaning of that hideous insult. "All we ask is an average sample of justice and—there's a sample for you, my jo-dandy!"

With an upward sweep of one hand Grip-sack Sid sent a glittering blade flying through the air, just as it was about to find a living sheath in the back of the impetuous ranchero. And with a blow as smooth and powerful as the stroke of an oiled piston, his other fist knocked the desperado endlong into a crowded mass of his fellows.

That fierce rush down the aisle could not be checked, and sent in front of it a narrow wave of human beings that forced Will Thorpe with his now insensible burden back between the seats to avoid being overthrown and trampled under foot.

"Fair play, all!" cried Grip-sack Sid, his voice ringing out clear as a trumpet note. "Shuttlecocks to the rescue! Cowboy against town bums and free lunch fiends! All we want is to see the coward who insults ladies and gentlemen from behind cover!"

"That's right—mighty right!"

"Make 'em show up, or down the shebang!"

"It's a bloody shame—an' Miss Thorpe right hyar, too!"

"Who killed Bailey Thorpe?"

"Who's got no thumb on his left hand?"

"Pollard—Pollard—Rex Pollard!"

It was a perfect Pandemonium, and the marvel was that long before this that single rash shot fired by the owner of the Shuttlecock had not been supplemented by scores of others.

The natural fear and expectation of this lent Will Thorpe double strength as he bent his every energy to getting Imo out of the building, hoarsely calling on all decent people to aid and not bar their way. But his individual efforts could have availed little in such a frightful commotion, and only for others being in much the same condition, having woman-folk to guard and protect, uniting and making a cool, steady push up the aisle with strong men in front, he might never have succeeded.

A few of the cowboys who were cool enough to recognize his voice or face, rallied and lent their aid, never ceasing their efforts until the fresh outer air was finally gained.

Meanwhile Rex Pollard, paying no heed to the growing cries and threats turned principally toward him, savagely fought his way to the orchestra rail, over which he leaped, securing a foothold on the stage and with a doughty ally close at his side.

"Peace, gentlemen!" screamed Grip-sack Sid, with a backward glance and a wave of his hand. "We'll introduce the actors in a holy second!"

Straight at the white screen Rex Pollard leaped, shifting revolver for bared knife, splitting that picture fairly in twain as though he felt through the circle of light was the shortest path to the enemies who had dealt him such cruel blows.

"Steady, partner!" warningly cried the Sample Sport as he followed closely, gripping the sound shoulder of his friend and checking him as he was about to run into the table on which rested the magic lantern. "Look out for teeth! They may—Hello!"

With a swift twirl he turned on the light to more fully reveal the human figure which his roving glance had detected, lying near one side of the stage, and in another instant he was by its side—to recognize Professor King, bound with a strong rope, his head blinded in the muffling folds of a heavy shawl!

"Hell's afloat!" cried a coarse voice as the white screen came fluttering down with the rush of half a dozen armed men. "Look at the gal—look at Lodge-e-tanny!"

Grip-sack Sid rose and turned, hand on pistol in case of need, but as he recognized the tall figure and patriarchal beard of Marshal John Davidson among others, he promptly called out:

"Let the city marshal take charge! Law and

order before all else! Back the marshal up, all honest men!"

It was a timely diversion, for it may well be doubted if Davidson himself had once thought of his official position since that outbreak began. But now both he and the rest of the men who had invaded the stago, seemed to feel the mystic power of the law, and to grow subdued in manner even while becoming more confused in brain.

It afforded a welcome breathing space, and gave the keen-witted stranger time to take a rapid glance about him.

He saw Professor King lying helplessly bound and blinded, and almost directly opposite, also on the bare flooring, La Gitana was lying on her back, a crumpled cloth resting upon her face.

The professor was showing signs of life and a longing for liberty by rolling from side to side and lifting his hampered feet, but if she had indeed been a corpse, La Gitana could not have remained more quiet, even when one of the men snatched the cloth from her face with a low, awed cry of angry consternation.

"She's dead—p'izened with this!" as he hurled the scented cloth far from him.

Rex Pollard stood staring about him, weapons in hand, but like one more than half-dazed, now that he could see no enemy on whom he could wreak his just vengeance.

Grip-sack Sid noticed the piles of glass slides lying beside the lantern, and hurriedly looked among them for the ones which had precipitated that miniature riot, but without success. Only the one that still remained in the machine—the face of Rex Pollard—remained.

The yelling, cursing, hooting and bowling mob was surging over the orchestra railing, and Grip-sack Sid leaped at his sole chance of getting his new friend out of peril, catching Davidson by the arm and forcing him toward the front as he hastily cried:

"Call to order, marshal! They'll cover the trail if you let them have full swing. You're the only man they'll listen to!"

A vigorous push sent the official to the footlights, and Grip-sack Sid lent the other men just the needed impetus by urging them to his support.

"You're his posse, gents! Back him up in cooling 'em down, or the gang'll make a rush that'll do hurt to the lady—La Gitana!"

Like a flock of sheep following their bell-wether they obeyed, and taking advantage of this, Grip-sack Sid caught Rex Pollard by the arm and forced him off the stage past the helpless professor, with:

"This way—we'll nab the cur yet if we're quick on foot!"

It was a blind rush, for of course he could know nothing of the arrangement beyond, but with his main thought bent to getting the maddened ranchero out under the stars, Grip-sack Sid plunged ahead.

Fortune stood by him so far, for in a very brief space of time he found the rear entrance open, and with a hand tight gripping Pollard by his sound arm, he sprang out into the starlight.

"Look!" he cried, pointing in the direction he preferred taking just then; "isn't that a man running? Dollars to cents it's our game?"

The ruse was a clumsy one, but it sufficed for the moment.

Rex Pollard was too thoroughly excited, too greatly stunned and stupefied at one and the same time, to stop for reasoning, and together the two men raced on under the moonlight until they reached the spot where Rule Keeler had been left in charge of their horses, with strict orders not to leave until their coming, let what might happen.

"What's broke loose, boss?" the veteran excitedly began, only to be cut short by Grip-sack Sid with:

"Look to your master, my man, and keep him here until I come back, if you have to lasso him! It's that or his death—you hear?"

Through the night there came those wild, ugly, increasing yells and fierce threats from reckless throats. More noisy now than dangerous, but in a fair way to speedily reach the pitch where death and bloodshed alone could pacify them.

"You mean—" pantingly began Pollard, but Grip-sack Sid did not wait to hear him out, darting away toward the rear of the theater even as he called back:

"To do my level best for you and against your enemies!"

In a very brief space of time the Sample Sport regained the stage from which such an unexpected sensation had been supplied the citizens of Round-up, to find that matters had undergone very little change since his departure.

His first glance showed him that while all of the ladies had escaped from the ball, the great mass of the audience remained, surging and rioting, only kept from swarming over the orchestra railing and flooding the stage by the hoarse exhortations of the city marshal, whose sluggish wits made him keep to the track another placed him on until he was switched off by actual force.

No one had thought to lend a hand to help

the professor, who was writhing in his bonds, while La Gitana lay motionless as though dead.

Grip-sack Sid quickly tore the muffler from the man's head and face, to find him gagged as well. This also he removed, and sharply uttered with lips close to the professor's ear:

"Who did the job? Tell me, and I'll see that you win sweet revenge—quick!"

The professor gasped painfully, like one nearly at the point of suffocation, then shook his head hopelessly.

"Didn't you see him or them?"

"No—water—struck behind—"

With an angry growl Grip-sack Sid slashed through the rope with a keen blade, then turned toward La Gitana in faint hopes of gleaning the truth from that quarter.

But here, too, he was doomed to disappointment, for there came no answer to his call, no response to his impatient shake of an arm save a faint, spasmodic shudder. Beyond a doubt the woman was alive, but she appeared to be still under the influence of some powerful drug or anesthetic.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TURNING THE TIDE.

EVEN as Grip-sack Sid renewed his effort to arouse La Gitana, the smoldering riot broke forth still more savagely, one shrill, peculiar voice leading the way with the question:

"Who killed Bailey Thorpe?"

The answer came promptly, in deep, almost sepulchral tones:

"The man with the crippled left hand!"

"Pollard—Pollard—Rex Pollard!"

"Make the durn critter 'fess up!"

"Whar is he?"

"Sneakin' fer home while we're harkin' to a durned ole blather-mouthed burro!" recklessly cried still another, who plainly held Marshal John Davidson in scant reverence.

"Who'll avenge Bailey Thorpe?" again sounded that shrill voice.

A fierce, deadly chorus drowned all individual speech, and although he saw La Gitana feebly lift her head, Grip-sack Sid dared not linger longer there, for his new friend's sake.

"Is she in the plot?" flashed through his busy brain as he sprung out of sight from the stage and sought the rear entrance. "I'll bear that in mind, but can't do anything with her now—worse luck!"

The building was fairly shivering under that savage storm of strained voices, and the uproar could be heard all through Round-up City, and far beyond its limits as the mob began to pour out of the Opera House, hurling their fierce threats against "Bloody-hand Pollard o' the Shuttlecock!"

Not until that moment had Rex Pollard paid particular attention to the manner in which his own name was being coupled with the foul assassination of Bailey Thorpe, but now it pierced the strange cloud which had fallen over his brain at sight of that damning pictures on the white screen.

"What is that?" straightening up in his saddle, hand falling to weapon as he caught the cry. "The cowardly curs! I'll see if they dare snarl openly in the face of a man!"

"Hold, partner!" cried Grip-sack Sid, just in time to catch his horse by the head and check a rush which might easily have ended in sudden if not a shameful death. "It's a put-up job, and we've got to rally the boys first or go up a tree—sure!"

"Mind him, boss, an' I'll round-up the boys in a twink!" cried Rule Keeler, dashing away toward the surging crowd, uttering a peculiar call which every hand of the Shuttlecock would instantly recognize.

Already the crowd was sifting into two distinct parts, the cowboys and ranch-owners dividing from the citizens, as a rule, though a goodly number of the more respectable business men also shrunk away from the lower, tougher element.

Even before the Shuttlecocks rallied in answer to the call of their foreman, matters bade fair to settle down as range against town.

Rule Keeler came back with half a score men from the ranch, and as Grip-sack Sid had in a measure calmed the hot-tempered ranchero, he left him with this nucleus while joining Keeler in adding to their force.

Mounted, riding like a true-born cowboy despite his garb, the Sample Sport called on the range-men to rally in self-defense.

"It's all a put-up job to down the cattlemen by the town bums and free-lunch flocks," he declared, boldly. "Shall the riff-raff run Rack-about Range! Will you let the rag-tag-and-bob-tail play you dirt, and listen to them crow as they rub it in?"

Among those whose ears tingled as they caught those wild cries which meant—or might mean before the end, unless prompt measures were taken to calm the growing storm—bloodshed and death, was Imo Thorpe, whom Cousin Will had succeeded in restoring to consciousness and an ability to sit her horse.

In company with a number of other ladies and gentlemen who lived outside of Round-up City, the cousins were on the point of leaving

town when the crowd came surging out of the opera-house, seemingly in mad quest of Rex Pollard.

As she heard that shrill voice once more demanding who killed Bailey Thorpe, with its sonorous echo, denouncing the ranchero, Imo drew rein with a cry of passionate pain.

"It is a vile falsehood! He is innocent!"

"Let him prove it, then!" sternly cried Will Thorpe, his face pale but his big blue eyes fairly ablaze with strong emotion.

"They'll give him no chance—he'll be foully murdered unless—Gentlemen!" throwing out her trembling hands with an appealing gesture, "will you stand quietly by and see this foul crime committed? Will you not—Hark!"

"Who murdered Bailey Thorpe?"

"The man with the crippled left hand."

"Shall lying and gold-bought perjury save him from justice?"

"Not if there are white men living in Round-up!"

"Show your colors, men of Round-up! All white men to the front!"

"Hang him—run him to the black gallows over yea!"

"Whar's the man an' the neck?" roared a tall, red-topped figure, whirling a coiled lasso about his head as he sprung to the front. "Hyar's the rope, an' hyar's the han' that'll rig the loop!"

"Where's La Gitana?" mockingly cried Grip-sack Sid, as he rode at the head of the cowboys whom he and Rule Keeler had succeeded in collecting from the mass. "Sorrel-top wants another engagement."

It was a lucky hit, for nearly everybody recognized Raw-beef Bill Crumple, and even those of his own gang burst out in laughter.

That peal was quickly cut short, as a shot was fired—by whom, at whom, from whence no one seemed able to say or even to guess. But it bade fair to prove the final spark needed to bring on the explosion.

Imo Thorpe heard the shot, and her love caused her to think it must have been directed at the man whom, despite all, she so trusted, and breaking away from the side of her cousin with a sobbing cry, she sped to the front, lifting her whip hand almost menacingly as she faced the howling, cursing mob.

"For shame, you snarling curs!" she cried, her voice ringing out clear and cutting, all trace of physical weakness vanishing. "Who are you to set yourselves up as the avenger of an honest gentleman? Who gave you the right to raise the cry of blood, especially against a man who has fairly proven his perfect innocence of all crime?"

Will Thorpe came dashing up on one hand, while Rex Pollard and Rule Keeler drew near from the opposite direction.

"Thar he is, an' he killed yore pap!" cried a coarse voice from out the crowd.

"Prove it, and I'll make over to you every dollar my father left behind him!" swiftly cried Imo. "Prove it, and the Diamond Cross is yours to do with as you like! But, men of Round-up, not even you shall cheat the gallows—not even you shall rob an orphaned girl of her sworn vengeance by lynch law!"

Rex Pollard pushed his mount past the little group and faced the mob with empty hands, sternly crying:

"If a single honest man among you all really thinks I murdered the father of the lady I'm proud to love and honor, let him send a shot straight to my heart!"

A man on foot came running swiftly through the little interval by which the opposing forces were divided, then facing the mob with uplifted hand, his voice ringing out clear as a clarion:

"Steady, men of Round-up! The one who dares to flash knife, show rope, or burn powder shall answer to me!"

A double cheer—loud and exultant from the men of the Range, faint and scattering from their adversaries—proved the recognition of the speaker, whose magnetic power was never more fully exemplified than on the present occasion.

Truly, Lee Chandler was making good his title of Prince of Round-up City!

Rex Pollard gave a violent start as he recognized his rival, and a hand instinctively dropped to the butt of a revolver, but before he could do more, both Grip-sack Sid and Rule Keeler were beside him, gently but resolutely forcing his horse backward and to one side.

"Don't kick over the frying-pan, partner!" frowningly muttered the Sample Sport. "Fight fire with fire, and if we don't scorch Satan's fleshy fork, then I'm a traveling fraud."

If he saw or heard, Lee Chandler gave no attention to this move, but in sharp, curt sentences he addressed the irresolute mob, never showing to better advantage in all his life than right then and there.

"Right or wrong, a lady's word should and shall be respected as law and Gospel while I can utter word or strike a blow," he concluded. "Step out, white men! Come to me every honest man who dares fight for the right against the wrong! Show the riff-raff your true colors!"

A hearty cheer proved that the tide had been successfully turned.

CHAPTER XXV.

NECK AGAINST NECK.

THE mob swayed back and forth, and for a brief space it seemed as if the turning of the tide was taking the direct opposite to that intended by Lee Chandler, but it was only an internal commotion caused by the disagreeing elements separating one from the other.

A storm of cries and cheers rent the air, hardly less loud than what had gone before, but with a material difference; then it was a savage roar for vengeance, and the name most frequently pronounced was coupled with a shameful death.

As the human whirlpool divided, a solid portion sweeping forward to completely surround the smaller group back of Lee Chandler, the others scattering and falling back, many of their number slinking rapidly away from the spot as though already ashamed of their fury, the one name which rung out loudest, most often, was that of the man who had, almost single-handed and by the magic of his voice alone, turned back the tide of destruction.

"Chandler—Chandler—Lee Chandler!"

"The Prince of Round-up!"

"The whitest man in God's country!"

"What he says goes!"

"Whether it's black or white—whether it's a lie or not!"

With that first surge toward them, the Round-up Sharp sprung lightly to the side of Imo Thorpe, his love for her apparently causing him to misjudge the aim of his fellow-citizens, for as his right hand filled with a revolver, his left firmly clasped hers, his voice ringing out softly yet firmly:

"Trust in me, Miss Thorpe. I'll build a wall of snarling curs up around you before a hair of your head shall come to harm!"

It was well that he acted with such alertness. A moment lost and he could have found no fair excuse for giving such an heroic proof of his loyal love and utter self-abnegation.

Not even the most timid could long mistake the pacific temper of the roaring, cheering mass, at least toward Lee Chandler and those whom he so publicly championed, and Rex Pollard fairly shivered with sickening rage as he looked and listened, divining the truth.

"Steady, partner!" warningly muttered Grip-sack Sid as he noted the action. "He's got the cat by the tail, and it'll jump just according to the way he pinches. It's his deal now, but if I don't manage to cap the deck and spoil his draw, I'll throw up my commission and eat my grip!"

In that scene of wild confusion, much could be said and done by individuals without attracting anything like general attention, and no others seemed to notice that little by-play.

Not even for the purpose of clinching the point he hoped he had scored with Imo Thorpe, could Lee Chandler longer affect to misinterpret that surging rush, or fear aught of violence from the crowd by which they were now completely surrounded.

"Steady, men of Round-up!" he trumpeted, his clear notes rising above that confused medley as few others could have done without rising to a positive yell. "I thank you for your prompt and manly response to my appeal, although 'tis no more than I confidently expected from honest men—white as they make 'em!"

"We ketched it from you, boss!" cried an enthusiastic voice.

"Ef you say Pollard never done it, we ain't—"

"Drop my name, you curs!" harshly cried the owner of the Shuttlecock, breaking away from Grip-sack Sid and forging to the front, his mad temper once more overcoming his trial-weakening judgment. "I am here to answer for myself, and Lee Chandler is the last person on earth who can stand as my defender!"

"The position was forced upon me, Mr. Pollard," quickly said the Round-up Sharp, advancing with open hand. "No man living can more sincerely regret this night's work than I do, and to prove it—here's my hand; will you shake?"

Pollard flung out his hand, but it was with a gesture of fierce defiance and undying hatred.

"You are at the bottom of it all, and now—"

A storm of groans, hisses and ugly cries drowned his further words, until Lee Chandler with an imperious gesture bade the crowd subside. Silence promptly followed, giving one more startling proof of his marvelous power over that dangerous gathering.

Pollard was too blinded by rage and mortification to take warning or heed for himself, and fiercely persisted.

"You brought those infernal frauds here, Lee Chandler, to deal me a foul blow from cover, which you were too cowardly to strike with your own hand. Now—if there is a particle of manhood about you, you will give me the satisfaction one man owes another whom he has bitterly insulted and wronged!"

The Prince of Round-up drew back his rejected hand, but calmly waited until the ranch-owner concluded before making further sign or motion, coldly smiling up into that passion-contorted face the while.

"You are drunk—with anger, if not with liquor, Mr. Pollard," he coldly uttered, each word ringing out clear and distinct. "I never

fell so low as to quarrel in the presence of ladies; I'm too old to begin a record in that line now."

"Then name your time and place, unless—"

But Lee Chandler was no longer listening, having turned his back and gained the side of Imo Thorpe, whose flushing and paling face told how greatly she was suffering from that painful scene after all she had been called upon to undergo that evening.

"Make way, gentlemen!" sternly cried the gambler, as he led her horse by the bit. "The ladies wish to retire. Clear a path, if you please."

Rex Pollard would have followed, but both Grip-sack Sid and Rule Keeler closed in on him, the cowboys from the Shuttlecock gathering about in obedience to a signal from their foreman; for while the crowd showed no positive intention of breaking forth along the old lines, it was plain enough for a cool brain to realize how very little more was needed to precipitate the narrowly averted tragedy.

As though Chandler's hand possessed the power of Moses's staff, a path was opened for the little party on horseback, closing behind them as if for the express purpose of keeping the rival from following.

"I haven't words strong enough to express my regret for all that has happened this evening, Miss Thorpe," said Chandler, when the crowd was fairly cleared. "My first act, after I see you in safety, shall be to apply the torch to that ill-starred building. Would that it had never been begun!"

"The building wasn't to blame for what happened inside it," curtly interjected Will Thorpe. "Let that go, and try to discover who was malicious coward enough to commit such a dastardly outrage. Find out who worked those slides, and I'll call you our best friend!"

"And—Mr. Chandler!" unsteadily began Imo, a trembling hand touching his hand as she leaned over in the saddle, swiftly adding: "Do not quarrel. He is mad, through long and bitter suffering!"

"For your sake, Imo," ardently breathed the gambler, his mustached lips covertly brushing her hand as he clasped it warmly. "For your sweet sake I'll bear anything and everything a man may without positive dishonor."

The maiden freed her hand, and sent her steed forward without a word for herself, or giving him a chance to say more, but Chandler laughed softly to himself, like one who feels fairly content.

"Why shouldn't I be?" he reflected. "I've placed her under an obligation which she cannot even if she would ignore. And as for that hot-head—Well, I've got a ring in his nose!"

The light of the moon was clear enough to show the keen-eyed gambler the little squad of horsemen in the midst of the crowd, and recognizing the tall figure of Rex Pollard among them, he pushed his way forward until he entered that slight open space.

"Rex Pollard!" he called out, in clear, cold tones.

"Then you haven't run away!" sneered the ranch-owner, his revolver glittering in the moonlight. "Clear a path, gentlemen! Draw, you cur!"

But Lee Chandler simply held up a hand, palm open, and still advanced toward his impetuous rival, while adding calmly:

"Shoot, if you wish to brand yourself the cur you mistakenly call me, Mr. Pollard. You ought to be able to down a man as long as you can see that both his hands are empty!"

"Fill, them, and take the first shot yourself," was the fierce retort. "I'll grant you that much advantage; all I want is to take you out of the world with me!"

"You might be caught in worse company," with a fleeting smile on his handsome face, "but that don't count. If powder *must* be burned between us this night, you've got to touch it off."

"Are you *all* cur? Can't I say or do ought to stir your craven blood?" fiercely cried the ranchero, with hot rage almost suffocating him. "Shall I brand you with a blow?"

"I don't think I'd go quite so far, if I were you, Mr. Pollard," steadily replied the gambler, coming still closer to his maddened rival. "That would be putting still another brand upon yourself, since I've bluntly told you my hands are firmly bound, so far as you are concerned. And I'd hate to see you hanged—just at present!"

"Which he would—bet yer life!" cried one of the crowd, to have his threat echoed back by a score of lusty voices.

"Peace, men of Round-up!" sharply cried Chandler, with an imperious wave of his hand, then turning once again toward his rival, speaking quickly yet calmly: "If I decline your challenge, Mr. Pollard, it is only because a lady whom we both honor and respect begged me to spare your life."

"You lie, Lee Chandler!"

"And you brand yourself a pitiful coward by using such an epithet toward a man whom you know is in honor bound not to resent it in the only way it so richly deserves. Some day I'll

remind you of it, but just now—listen to me, Mr. Pollard.

"You and I are rivals in love, but as a matter of course only one of us can hope to win the prize. I have reason to believe I have won the inside track, but I'm frank enough to make you a fair and square offer by accepting which we can start even in the race."

"Don't you dare bring her—the name of a lady before this gaping mob!" hoarsely cried Pollard, his face flushing hotly.

"All Rack-about Range knows how the situation stands between you and I, Rex Pollard," coldly persisted the gambler. "Let names go, since you are so mighty sensitive, but my counter challenge must out."

"There has been a foul and dastardly crime committed, and the red-handed villain is still unwhipt of justice. You and I—as all other honest men—have an interest in seeing justice administered; but you and I, as rivals in love, ought to feel a double interest in running down the assassin and bringing his neck to the rope."

"I dare you to join in an oath to never give over until that murderer is caught and punished. And let the man who does most toward clearing up that black mystery, take the rare prize—let the one who fails in the trial pledge himself to abandon the race, and go away to never show face on Rack-about Range again."

"This is my challenge, Rex Pollard: dare you accept it?"

"I do—I accept it without a moment's hesitation!" impulsively cried the ranchero.

"Good enough!" crowed Grip-sack Sid, swinging his hat in the air as he added: "Neck against neck, and I'll furnish the rope for the hanging from my line of samples, free of charge!"

"Augh! hark to the tape-worm an' kaliker pincher!" fairly snorted Raw-beef Bill Crumple, swaggering to the front.

"La Gitana—where's La Gitana?" retorted the Sample Sport.

A roar of laughter rose at this quip, and at a gesture from Chandler, the fiery-headed cowboy beat a retreat through the crowd.

"It's a fair bargain, then, Mr. Pollard? Shall we shake on it?"

"I'll give you my hand at the foot of the gallows, not before, sir!" sternly uttered Pollard, wheeling his horse and riding away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A STURDY YOUNG GUARDIAN.

ONLY for a word which Rule Keeler ventured to whisper into the ear of his master, Rex Pollard could not have torn himself away so abruptly, for in his present state, with nerves so terribly unstrung by all he had undergone for many long months past, he was morbidly fearful of showing the white feather.

Though he had done all that man could do to provoke a fight with his rival, he certainly would not have been the first to abandon that field if another and still more important matter had not pressed upon him.

"They'll be gittin' a turrible long start, boss," were the words ventured by Rule Keeler. "Ef you don't ketch this chaine, no tellin' when they'll be 'nother open to ye!"

There was no opposition offered to their retreat, and as soon as they were fairly clear of the town, Rex Pollard muttered a word to his foreman, then gave his willing steed the spur, dashing ahead at a swift gallop.

"It's all right, lads, an' you, boss," hurriedly cried Rule Keeler, wheeling his horse in front of the party the quicker to call attention to his explanation. "He's got a duty on han' which don't call fer no sort o' help from any o' us."

"You'll keep an eye in his direction, though, old man?" asked Grip-sack Sid, reining up his horse. "Though that put-up job fizzled out, there may be another one lying back of it."

"Not the way the boss is going now," quietly responded Keeler.

"That's all right, then," with a satisfied nod.

"Reckon I'll stop over in town and see what odds and ends I can pick up, by chance. Just let Pollard know that I'll be on hand when wanted, will you?"

Without waiting to further explain his intentions, the Sample Sport wheeled in the direction of Round-up City once more.

Meanwhile, Rex Pollard was riding swiftly along the trail which led to Diamond Cross, keenly watching for first glimpse of the woman whom he so passionately loved, with her escort.

It would be difficult to explain just what his thoughts were during those few minutes of suspense.

He knew that Imo Thorpe had attended the performance at the Opera House solely to give him a chance to meet and have a word with her, for Rule Keeler had faithfully performed his errand of the night before.

But how would she meet him, after what had that night occurred?

Despite his whirling, half-unsettled brain, he could appreciate how intensely she must have suffered during the unexpected display of those damning pictures on the screen. What if she were to place the blame of her agony on his shoulders? What if she should decline to receive him? What if—

He caught sight of two riders ahead, and recognizing his love, despite the distance and the gloom, he left that ugly doubt unuttered as he spurred swiftly forward.

No less keen were the eyes of Imo Thorpe, and only an instant later she recognized the figure in chase.

"Will, dear Will!" a trembling hand clasping the nearest arm of her escort. "You will not be harsh—you will try to treat him like a gentleman, for my sake!"

"Imo!" frowned the young man, as he glanced from that approaching horseman to the pale face of his cousin.

"I sent him word of those letters, Will, dear, and begged him to meet me this night, that I might explain just how they came into my possession," hastily added the maiden, in true woman fashion, taking a little bigger share of the burden than she really deserved.

"It is no more than his due. Please be kind—for my sake?"

There was time for no more words, since Rex Pollard was already close behind them in his lovely ardor, and for one taken so by surprise, Will Thorpe really acted quite creditably.

"One word, Mr. Pollard," he cried, wheeling his horse and holding up an open hand to check that rider. "Miss Thorpe has just told me that she consented to give you an interview this evening. If I had known of it in time, I would certainly have taken measures to prevent a meeting which, under present circumstances, can result in nothing but pain and regret to her—possibly to you as well."

"Will!" appealingly murmured the maiden.

"As it is, I'll give you ten minutes together. At the end of that grace, if you are a gentleman, you will be prepared to go your way while we go ours."

Without pausing for a reply, Will Thorpe rode to the right, putting perhaps fifty yards' space between the lovers and himself, then headed his horse in the same direction, keeping steady pace with their movements.

"He is hard, Mr. Pollard," hurriedly murmured Imo, affecting not to see the hand that was extended to clasp hers. "But after all that has happened, you can scarcely blame him."

"And you, Imo?" his voice so unsteady as to be almost inarticulate. "You also condemn me as guilty?"

"I do not!" the maiden flashed, facing him with frank hand, her eyes glowing as she added: "Would I have sent you that warning if I held you so vile? Would I be talking with you now?"

Pollard was unable to speak, a choking sob coming from his lips as he bowed his head over that little hand.

"No, Rex," her voice growing softer, her bosom swelling with strong emotion as they rode on, hand in hand. "I know you are innocent, but while my poor father lies unavenged, the old times can never be revived. Even if I could think of—if I had room in my poor heart for other thoughts than of finding and punishing his cruel murderer, I would root them out with a pitiless force!"

"Never to take root again, Imo?" hoarsely asked Pollard, his burning gaze holding her eyes as though through a spell. "You *did* love me in those days; will that affection ever live again?"

"It may—sometimes I doubt, but I think now—"

"While I am with you, darling! While I can gaze into your dear eyes and press your hand! But how will it be when I am absent? Am I ever to be barred away from you, Imo Thorpe?"

The girl gave a sudden start, freeing her hand and brushing it across her eyes like one rousing from a dream.

"Away—that is what I meant to urge upon you, Rex! You must go away—far away from this place, and—"

"Go away and leave you to Lee Chandler?" almost savagely cried the ranchero, his mad temper once more flashing forth, though he made a desperate effort to curb it the next moment. "Imo Thorpe, before high Heaven I firmly believe that Lee Chandler fired the shot that killed your poor father!"

With a low cry the maiden shrunk away from his clinched and uplifted right hand, though it was his words that frightened her, not his actions.

Will Thorpe was watching keenly, however, and now spurred his horse toward them, speaking sternly as he drew up alongside:

"Enough, Mr. Pollard. Your time is up, and this interview must end. Go your way, and let us go ours."

Rex Pollard lowered his hand, laughing harshly as he said:

"Have I fallen so terribly low in your estimation, Will, that you could think me base enough to threaten or menace Miss Imo?"

"It was not at me, cousin, but a vow to avenge poor father," hurriedly explained the maiden.

"That's all right," nodded her sturdy young guardian, but without any softening of his manner as he spoke again to the ranchero. "I never said you were about to strike my cousin."

Mr. Pollard, mad as I begin to believe you have become of late."

"Haven't I suffered enough to unsettle any man's brain? Can you look back over the past year and tell me I am a poor fool to go mad?"

"Mad or sane, drunk or sober, Rex Pollard, our paths part right now and right here," persisted Will Thorpe with stern coldness. "I don't accuse you of being crazy, any more than I brand you with the crime of murder, but this much I do say, and I say it slow enough for you to write down each and every word on your brain:

"Until you can prove yourself innocent—until you can stand a white man, honest and true, in the eyes of the whole world—you must keep away from Diamond Cross. If I find you prowling about the place, by day or by night, I swear I'll treat you as I would a wolf, and shoot you down at sight!"

"You are her relative, Mr. Thorpe, and can say what you please," coldly bowed the ranchero, turning toward Imo, and before either could divine his purpose, clasping her tightly and pressing his lips to hers, then releasing her and giving his horse free rein. "Good-by, my love! When I see you again 'twill be to show you your father's assassin!"

"Heaven speed the day!" impulsively cried Imo, as Will caught her rein and forced her away. "Find the guilty one, Rex Pollard, and then come to me for your reward!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TALE OF A LION.

AFTER parting with Rule Keeler and the cowboys belonging to the Shuttlecock, Grip-sack Sid made the best of his way to the main hotel in Round-up City, but as he found no one in attendance at the stable kept in connection, he saw to putting up his horse himself.

Taking the rather peculiar looking grip-sack from behind the saddle, to which it was strapped much after the fashion of a blanket roll, he entered the hotel, finding only a couple of rather frightened women about the place.

One of these proved to be the landlord's wife, and after a little explanation he managed to secure a room from her, proceeding thither at once.

He remained only long enough to open his larger valise and take from it a number of articles which he packed into the little grip which he wore at his left hip, then locking the other, fastening the door as he left the chamber, he left the hotel, as chance would have it without being noticed by the women, who were anxiously watching from a side window and listening to the slowly stilling uproar in town.

"Where can they be?" muttered the Sample Sport, pausing with an air of doubt very unlike his customary confident dash. "They're registered, safe enough, but would they have gone to bed this soon after the racket? Would it be worth while to hunt for them around the hall?"

His brain was busy with thoughts of La Gitana and Professor King, and it was with strong hopes of finding them at the hotel after the untimely closing of their entertainment, that led him to desert Rule Keeler and the Shuttlecocks so abruptly.

"Dollars to cents the woman was as wide awake all through as I am right now!" he nodded, grimly. "If I could get a chance to sing a little solo in her pearl-shell ear, I'd double the odds and agree to turn the whole trick wrong side out! If I've got to have it!"

He paused once more when not far from the new Opera House, but as he saw that a considerable crowd was still lingering in that vicinity, though the uproar was rapidly quieting, he altered his course and only slackened pace when he stood within the broad glare of light coming through the wide doors and glass front of the Alhambra.

A glance showed him that quite a number of men were gathered before the bar, plainly discussing the exciting events which had marred even while increasing the interest of the initial performance at the new Opera House.

Five minutes later Grip-sack Sid was one of the busiest of the talkers, and apparently on terms of closest intimacy with nearly every person in the big saloon.

"But that don't count," he was saying with his frank, careless, yet smooth tongue, in answer to a hint from one of the citizens that he had cut rather a wide swath, himself, at the hall. "I went there by Pollard's invitation. Pollard was the only soul I had even a speaking acquaintance with in all this rattling little city, and of course I felt in honor bound to follow his lead. Still, if I've offended any gentleman by word, act or motion, I'm ready and more than willing to meet him—over a bottle and a glass! Which reminds me of the two governors—More wet, barkeeper."

It seemed impossible for even the most cautious to find fault with such an honest, frank fellow, and Grip-sack Sid bade fair to capture the whole town, if he could only keep up his stroke to the end.

"That's my only fault, gentlemen," he declared, candidly, as he replaced his empty glass on the bar, and took up an easy position where he could watch all who entered, even while giv-

ing no hint that such was his purpose. "I'm too modest; too slow about coming forward; too apt to reach the table after all but the water and toothpicks are gone.

"Only for that failing, I'd be sitting in my palatial office way back under the genial warmth of the rising sun, watching a dozen clerks clipping my coupons, instead of having to rustle for my chuck harder than any cowboy or miner you ever knew! Only for that I'd be senior partner, instead of a traveling agent for the biggest, whitest, richest and most enterprising house this side of kingdom come.

"And that reminds me," with a bland smile and confidential nod toward the dandified barkeeper, as he opened his grip-sack and took therefrom several small flasks with brilliant labels. "You keep the choicest brands I've run across since leaving Chicago, sport, but if you'll just take the trouble to test these samples—warranted not to kill from just taking a smell, by the way—when you have a leisure hour on hand, I'll guarantee you'll never rest until you give me your card and order."

"The boss isn't in. I'm only hirel," curtly replied the other, his smile vanishing at this unexpected discovery.

"That's all right," with a still blander smile as he placed a number of cigars alongside the bottles. "I'd rather hit the genuine head than the figurehead, for our house banks on pure merit, and the boss would have to ask your opinion before making such a change, of course. And—if you do anything in the card line, now?"

"Fully supplied, I imagine, sir."

"That goes without saying, for an establishment like this—and if I had been dropped down in here with my eyes blinded, I'd take oath I was in New York! I knew I'd stand a mighty poor show, the moment I took a fair glance, if it wasn't for the quality of the samples I carry in my little grip, here. All they want is to be examined. All I want is room to leave a few of them: the rest is bound to come!"

Just at that juncture the trampling of heavy feet was heard without, and Grip-sack Sid quietly shifted his position to one less conspicuous as he saw what a tough-looking gang was filling the entrance.

Towering half a head above the majority was a fiery-headed fellow, whom he instantly recognized as the cowboy whom La Gitana had flung into the orchestra.

Grip-sack Sid had barely time enough to make this observation, when one of the men with whom he had been drinking before opening his grip, moved to his side, making room at the bar for Bill Crumple and his mates, and asking the Sample Sport:

"What house do you represent, by the way, stranger?"

Grip-sack Sid promptly presented him with his card, saying:

"The house, you might say, sir: the commercial clearing house, our feeble imitators long since acknowledged us."

"Sporting goods, mainly, of course!"

"Anything and everything that can be called strictly first class, my dear sir," with cordial alacrity. "Ready to fit out a peanut-stand or a ten-story building on all floors, with basement thrown in, and guarantee as careful attention and pure goods to the first as to the last. My orders are to slight no fair proposition; to book a dozen suspender-buckles just as gratefully and carefully as to take an order from an old bachelor millionaire for a plump and squeezable bride."

"To simmer it down, my dear sir, this world is our oyster, and I'm doing my little part toward opening it, at the same time."

"Give that calf more rope!" coarsely called out Raw-beef Bill, his attention caught by the voice of the Sample Sport as he drained his glass and half turned from the bar.

There was an instinctive shifting of places by those who stood between the two men, for several of those present had been witnesses to one or two little passages which had taken place that evening with the two strangers as principal actors therein, and the cowboy's face as he fairly recognized the Sample Sport took on an ugly scowl that might easily lead to a collision.

But Grip-sack Sid apparently did not take the remark to himself, for his smile never altered, his suave voice rattling on as usual.

"And yet, mind you, my dear fellow," he glibly uttered, taking a little round tin box from his grip and spinning it swiftly around on the tip of a finger while talking; "we have our specialties, too. For instance, you see this little tin box. Now that holds only half an ounce, according to weight, but when you come to measure it according to its merits, you will find it—"

"A flat fraud, with a bunco sharp to back it up!" loudly interjected Crumple, lolling back against the counter with elbows spread and thumbs stuck into his leather belt, just where his fingers could instantly close over the butt of pistol or knife.

"No quarreling allowed in this place, gents!" sharply called out the barkeeper, rapping with a glass on the counter.

"You shet, pardner," Crumple flung over his shoulder, gruffly. "I reckon you see the boss chalk my back, didn't ye? An' as fer gittin' up

a racket, did ye ever know one o' them durned, lop-eared bummers to do more then shoot off tha'r double-gear'd tongues? Auh! go bury yourself, critter, an' stay thar ontel ye git rid o' that powerful smell!"

"Pure attar of roses, my dear sir, if you are alluding to me," Grip-sack Sid blandly said, with a little side nod toward the big cowboy. "If you can contrive to hold your nose for a few minutes while I finish this job, I'll show you a sample of perfume that may hit your critical taste a bit harder."

"As I started to say," turning back to the other man, tapping the little tin box to point his meaning; "in this tiny compass we have one of the marvels of this remarkable age. It's an unguent—called Dewey's Magic Salve, by the way, after its inventor, Frank B. Dewey, of Kansas—and each box is warranted to—Let me give you one instance, which I can warrant simple truth."

"It took place during my honeymoon, and shortly after I became connected with The House. I had a lay-off, of course, and kept pretty close about home, knowing that as soon as the month was up I'd have to buckle on harness and take up my grips once more."

"My wife, by the way, was marvelously fond of pets, and had a dozen or more about the place all the time. Among them was a little kioodle, that was hardly worth the poison it would have taken to send him over the river on his final trip, but like a true woman, wife thought more of him than she did of all the rest put together."

"One day as I came from down-town, I found her in tears. Lion—she called the kioodle Lion, because he looked so much like a long-tailed lamb with the rickets, I believe, but never mind that, now. Lion was very sick—at the point of death, in fact. And unless I could save the dear, darling little angel, she wanted to die, too, and be buried in the same coffin!"

"Well, of course I had to hustle, when my birdie began to chirp in such lemoncholy way as that, and as I saw the poor devil was in extremis, apparently, I used the first thing that came to hand—and right there you begin to see where the Magic Salve comes in, gentlemen!"

"I had just brought a sample-box home with me; we were just taking hold of it, and knew but little of its really marvelous properties, for of course one can't always depend on what a man says of his wares."

"Not ef he's a tape-worm an' kaliker pincher!" grunted Crumple.

"I anointed the kioodle all over, rubbing it in well, then covered him up in his bed to die, as I fully expected. Right there I was fooled, and fooled most mighty bad, too!"

"Instead of dying, Lion was frisking about in the morning, bright as ever, and fully half as large again as before I gave him that dose, while his hair was growing so fast you could almost see it lengthen, at the same time changing its color for a more brilliant one."

"To cut this tale of a lion short, gentlemen, I used three boxes on our pet, at the end of which he was ten times taller, a hundred times heavier, with the sleekest paint-brush tail and the most magnificent mane you ever saw! From being simply Lion by name, he had turned to lion by nature as well as in looks, and before the week was out I had sold him for a snug five thousand dollars to Barnum, as a rattling curiosity of the purest water."

"As he was so ravenous, and as his hair had turned to bright red, his mane fairly scarlet and hot enough to set a lump of ice on fire, Barnum named him Raw-beef Bill!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB.

So earnestly and yet in such a matter-of-fact manner had the Sample Sport told his story, that not until the very end did any one of that gathering suspect his real meaning. And there was a brief silence after his smooth voice ceased speaking, before the hit provoked a general burst of laughter.

Even then the fiery-headed cowboy might not have caught the full sting, had not Grip-sack Sid bowed profoundly toward him in conclusion.

"You durned cuss!" exploded Crumple, drawing his athletic figure clear of the bar, his face redder than even nature and the warm sun had painted it. "You mean that as a hint at me? You mean I was that lion?"

"No one would ever think of calling you a lion, Raw-beef, who had any eye for ear-marks or ear for music," coolly responded the Sample Sport. "I never heard of but one animal belonging to your tribe that was so foolish, and he betrayed himself when he tried to roar, just as you are showing out your true nature right now."

Raw-beef Bill stood like one bewildered before that rapid speech, his sluggish wits failing him just when he tried to hold them keenest.

"What—somebody tell me what the durned fool is tryin' to git through him," he growled, savagely. "Ef he's thinkin' to poke fun—"

"He-baw-aw-baw!" came from behind his back, and as he whirled in that direction, another hidden voice called out:

"Here's Lodge-e-tanny!"

The truth found its way through that thick skull at last, and the infuriated cowboy wheeled upon Grip-sack Sid, flashing forth a huge knife as he snarlingly cried:

"I'm a wolf, an' hyar I come!"

The Sample Sport stood with both hands in the pockets of his sack-coat, apparently the most unconcerned of all in the saloon, a bland smile playing about his strong mouth. Only the steady glow which filled his eyes ought to have warned the cowboy he was playing the fool by giving him so brief a warning of his bloody purpose.

"I'm a lamb, stuffed with dynamite!"

Sharper, fiercer, equally as fierce as the wild slogan of Raw-beef Bill came this counter challenge, and as it crossed his lips, the Sample Sport sprang into marvelous action.

Leaping swiftly to one side, Grip-sack Sid struck aside that armed hand with a sweep of his left arm, turning the athletic cowboy partly around with the force of his parry, then out shot his right hand, falling fair upon the unguarded jaw of his adversary with a sickening crash.

"That's the dynamite exploding under your rough handling, Raw-beef Bill!" laughed the Sample Sport, as the desperado, lifted fairly from his feet, fell in a quivering, moaning heap half-way across the room.

"Howdy Moses!" exclaimed an awe-stricken son of St. Patrick an instant later, pointing with shivering finger at the fallen bully. "Will ye luck at the jaw av 'im, now?"

Other eyes had caught that ugly sight by the bright light of the lamps reflecting from the plate-glass mirror behind the bar, and more than one present turned toward the Sample Sport with wonder and curiosity mingling in their pale faces.

"He talked too much, gentlemen, and I thought to still him by a bit of an allegory," coldly said Grip-sack Sid, without so much as a glance toward the fallen desperado. "Unfortunately for him, he wouldn't have it that way. You saw how he came at me?"

"He meant murder, but I reckon you've knocked him out," grimly assented one of the citizens, venturing to touch the arm of the Sample Sport as though he hoped to discover the real secret of that terrible stroke which had, seemingly, crushed in one side of the cowboy's face as though a heavy horse had trampled upon him. "How'd ye do it, boss?"

"It was the attack of a coward, who saw I was unarmed. I met it with a coward's weapon," coldly replied the Sport, drawing his right hand from his pocket and slipping from it a plated pair of steel knuckles, tossing them on the bar where all could see and comprehend.

"Simply a sample, sent out as a pure matter of business by The House," cheerfully added the traveling drummer, seemingly willing to give the assembly all the information in his power. "I never wore them before, and trust I'll never have to bring such an ugly tool into play again while my head's warm."

One or two of the company, after a casual glance at the vicious tool, turned toward Raw-beef Bill, more from wonder if that terrible blow had slain him outright, however, than from anything like sympathy in his fate.

"I'll stand expenses and pay good wages to any one who may care to look after the fellow," said Grip-sack Sid, gravely, though there was a slight twinkle in his gray eyes as he added: "He'll pick up, easy enough, after the first benumbing shock wears off, I reckon."

"He's gittin' over it 'nough fer to kick, anyhow!" laughed one of the men, drawing back a bit as the cowboy gave a groan and flung out one foot.

"You can't kill a cowboy short of taking his internal machinery all apart," laughed the Sample Sport. "He'll be ready for the saddle to-morrow, though I do reckon it'll be a full week before he can fairly recognize himself in the glass."

"He won't be nigh as pritty, but he'll know a mighty sight more!" volunteered one of the party, ringing in the hoary chestnut.

"Even up the fust words he says is to ax ef it was a burro kicked him!" cried out another would-be wit.

"I'll be pleased to show him the implement," quietly said Grip-sack Sid, setting the knuckles to rocking on edge. "I might have kept the secret in my pocket, and passed myself on the company as the man with the iron fist, but that isn't my style, nor the style of Our House. Straight goods and square dealing, from start to finish, and though I'm proud to say they call me their right bower on the road, if I were to be caught tripping even in such a seeming trifle, they'd call me in by wire, and drop my head in the basket, too mighty quick!"

A groaning curse came from Raw-beef Bill, as he half-lifted himself from the blood-stained floor, spitting out several teeth with a mass of clotted blood.

"Who hit—whar is—"

The exquisite pain shooting through his head from his shattered jaw with that attempt to speak, checked his speech, but seemed to lend him a sort of unnatural strength, for he dashed a hand across his eyes, now rapidly puffing

up and discoloring, trying to clear his failing vision.

As his blurred gaze fell upon the manly figure of the Sample Sport standing in front of the bar, one hand keeping that ugly weapon gently oscillating, the other at his hip while talking blandly in a low and unmoved tone, he rose to a sitting posture, and jerked a revolver with murder in his mutilated face and blood-shot eyes.

"Look out, stranger!" cried several warning voices, but Grip-sack Sid never moved a muscle to escape or to draw a weapon.

His keen, practiced eye saw that the blinded cowboy was unable to cover him with his failing strength, and he simply called out:

"Guard your mirror, barkeeper—I knew it!"

The pistol exploded, the lead missing the Sample Sport, but making a costly star in the plate-glass behind the bar.

With a gasping curse, Raw-beef Bill fell back, once more helpless for the moment, and just as the enraged barkeeper was leaping out from behind the bar, a tall, athletic figure entered the saloon, a sharp, menacing tone demanding:

"What's the racket here? Who dares burn—Ha!" and he sprang to the side of the fallen cowboy as he recognized him. "Bill Crumple—my friend!"

A swift inspection showed him that crushed jaw, so different from what he had been led to expect from hearing that shot, and instantly his usual coolness returned to him as he rose to his feet, fixing his keen gaze on the face of Grip-sack Sid, as though guided by instinct.

"What has been going on in here? Who hit Bill Crumple?"

"I reckon it must have been me, partner," quietly replied the Sample Sport, his gray eyes glowing vividly as he faced the gambler, his hands in his pockets, as before the assault by Raw-beef Bill.

"With those knuckles?" and Lee Chandler nodded toward the bar.

"With those knuckles," nodded Harper. "The red-headed rascal took particular pains to trample on my toes. I gently intimated to him that I unfortunately had been forced to enter into the agricultural field, raising my own corn crop, but that only made him hotter for blood."

"He came at me with that toad-sticker you see over yonder. I had on my best suit of clothes, and couldn't afford to get them all mussed. I had been showing my samples, and gave William a working test, with the result before your two good-looking eyes."

"And if I hadn't known him simply as a tool, set at me by a cowardly master, afraid to do his own dirty work, I'd have shot him dead!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"GOOD-BY JOHN."

"You could hardly have served him worse," and the gambler cast a quick glance toward the suffering cowboy. "The poor devil is marked for life!"

"In return for trying to mark me for death," retorted the Sample Sport.

"It was a cowardly weapon to make use of, and—"

"Used on a bully whose actions were governed by the hand of a cur who dared not show himself to the front, Mr. Chandler," sharply interrupted Grip-sack Sid, taking a step nearer to the Prince of Round-up. "If I hadn't felt so sure of that, I'd have shot the rascal when he flashed steel upon me without cause or warning."

"I'm not claiming that I couldn't have turned the bully down without either shooting or marring, for I could. I knew him as a convenient tool, masking the will of another, and I wanted to mark him and send him home as a sample of what waited for his master."

"Bill Crumple was my friend," slowly uttered Chandler.

"I know it," nodded the Sample Sport, coldly.

"He only struck town last night. I have reason to believe that he has no other actual acquaintance in Round-up."

"Very likely. I hardly think any gentleman will dispute your right to call him friend or partner."

There was just the suspicion of a smile to be seen about those lips, and mortal man never seemed more wholly at ease than did Grip-sack Sid as he stood facing the man whom all Round-up had learned to respect and render tribute unto as a mighty "chief."

Those who heard and saw, fairly held their breath as they waited for the heavens to fall.

And yet—though no living man could give cause for thinking a drop of white blood flowed in the veins of the Round-up Sharp, Lee Chandler seemed strangely ill at ease, finding it difficult to select his words, speaking like one who felt obliged to wear a hard curb.

On the other side, Grip-sack Sid seemed actually defying his adversary to flatly advocate the cause of the moaning, groaning cowboy be-

hind him. Unless he was drunk with triumph over his recent victory, he surely must have some urgent reason for forcing a quarrel with Lee Chandler.

"And you think the poor devil was playing cat's-paw for another, do you?" persisted the gambler.

"Let it go at think, if you prefer the term," nodded Grip-sack Sid, smiling icily as he added: "Can't you tell me who set Raw-beef Bill at my throat, Mr. Chandler?"

"That faces your hand, sir, after what I have already said concerning Crumple and myself. You accuse me of setting him on to down you?"

"If the coat fits, put it on! You see how I marked the tool? Well, nominate your choice, Mr. Chandler, and I'll show you how I mean to mark the master!"

With low, half-frightened mutterings those who had gathered in the saloon began to fall further away from the two men, knowing from past experience that there could be but one answer to such a pointed speech—or thinking that way rather.

For, strange, incredible as it seemed to one and all, Lee Chandler simply flung up an empty hand, palm turned toward the audacious stranger who dared to thus openly beard him on his own stamping-grounds.

"Cowed, by the eternal smoke!" broke involuntarily from the lips of one of their number as he caught that gesture.

"You lie, Jem Thurston!" flashed the Round-up Sharp, recognizing the speaker by his voice, but without turning a glance in that direction.

"And you, Grip-sack Sid as you call yourself, are trying to make capital on a bunco basis, by ruffling up to a man whose hands you know to be tied. If they could strike a blow, your back would look this way, not your face!"

"Which means that you've lost all your stomach for fighting?" the Sample Sport blandly inquired.

"Which means simply that I'm bound in honor not to engage in any outside quarrel while the foul murder of Bailey Thorpe remains unavenged. You heard me tell Rex Pollard as much, not two hours ago."

"Then you really meant it?" echoed Grip-sack Sid, his brows arching, his strong face the picture of wondering doubt. "It wasn't simply a hole you were dodging through to escape a flogging—or worse?"

Lee Chandler strode forward until his person almost touched that of this mocking stranger, his face pale as though covered by a mask of snow, his eyes glowing like living fire.

The Sample Sport never budged, his hands still hidden in his pockets, but one of them made a slight motion which keen eyes noted, and more than one breath was quickly caught as a masked shot was listened and watched for.

"I'll kill you for that cowardly insult, the first hour my hands are set free!" harshly said the Round-up Sharp. "I tell you this, even though I know you've got me lined from your pocket. Shoot—and all the more indelibly brand yourself a cur!"

"Will you pledge your word, as a white man, Mr. Chandler, that you never pointed me out to yonder scoundrel as a fit subject for his hungry teeth?" coldly asked the sample Sport.

"I will not."

"Then you can't wonder at my words and actions!"

"I will not," steadily repeated the Round-up Sharp, his handsome lips curling with real or admirably counterfeited scorn. "Because such a question to a gentleman is an insult in itself, totally undeserving an answer other than with boot or rawhide."

Instantly Grip-sack Sid changed his manner, his hands coming empty from his pockets, a smile lighting up his strong face, his voice growing frank and even cordial as he spoke:

"Then I beg your pardon for rubbing it in so deep, Mr. Chandler, and take back every crooked word I said, unless you prefer to leave them on record until the time comes when you can answer them after another fashion."

"Isn't this a mighty sudden change of heart, sir?" sneered the athletic gambler, his own hands quietly crossing behind his back as the Sample Sport showed an inclination to cross palms with him.

"It's only a fool that can't listen to reason," blandly said the other, shaking his own hands as a convenient substitute. "If a man says he don't dare to take up a challenge—"

"I said unable to fight you, sir!"

"Different words with the same meaning, my dear fellow," with a careless nod. "I thought you fancied I was backing up Rex Pollard just a bit too openly, and so thought it best to fit me for planting under the willows."

"Why should I? What is Rex Pollard to me, let alone his friends?"

"I reckon the difference between you is known to all Round-up, so we'll let that pass. As for the other—well, with me down, Rex Pollard would be one backer to the bad."

"A tremendous loss, no doubt," sneeringly bowed Chandler, turning partly away as though grown weary of wasting words for naught.

"Thanks for the compliment, which may be worth a mighty sight more than you dream of,"

laughed Grip-sack Sid. "I'm backing Pollard. The house is backing me. And that's a combination to beat the world, saying nothing of Prince Lucifer and his red-headed imps!"

A flush of rage swept into the gambler's face, and his voice was harsh and menacing as he spoke again:

"You presume upon my being honor-bound, but take care! I'll bear your words in mind, and the hour that I've brought the killing of Bailey Thorpe home to the door of his assassin, I'll look you up. Sure as there's a Heaven above us this night, I'll kill you like a dog!"

"May you meet with better success than the wolf did," coolly nodded the Sample Sport, turning on his heel and nodding toward the bar-keeper as he spun a golden coin on the smooth counter. "A night-cap, if you please, Johnny, and others for as many of the gentlemen present who may care to join with me. The house pays for all, so hang the expense!"

Lee Chandler made a sign which was answered by two of those in the gathering, and under his directions they lifted the crippled cowboy to his feet, supporting him on either side and following the gambler from the saloon into the gambling-hall proper.

Chandler unlocked a door near the rear end of that apartment, letting the three men pass through in advance, then following after and closing the door behind him.

Grip-sack Sid took note of all this, though without appearing to do so, and it gave him the impression that at last Lee Chandler had concluded to cast off the thin disguise he had been wearing for so long, and openly confessing his ownership of the Alhambra.

"Sorry to tear myself away so early, gentlemen," he bowed, after their glasses were emptied. "It isn't my usual habit, but—to tell the truth and shame the adversary, you know—I'm heap too deeply mortified to hang out longer. Give you my word I never was mixed up with such a silly fiasco before, and hope I never will be again."

"It's a worse puzzle to us, be sure!" echoed one of the party, his face proving the truth of his words. "No living man ever made Lee Chandler take water before."

"He explained it all right," generously said the Sample Sport. "I must shoulder my share of the blame, but I thought he only objected to fighting with the stock man, instead of turning quaker to the world."

Gayly promising to see them later, the Sample Sport left the Alhambra, casting a quick, precautionary glance around him before making his way toward the now dark and seemingly deserted Opera House.

As his words and actions have plainly evidenced, he took a strong interest in the mysterious case of Bailey Thorpe, and after what took place at the "show," he felt reasonably confident that both La Gitana and Professor King were engaged in the plot against Rex Pollard.

"The trick was turned neat enough, and might have deceived one who knew nothing of your past record, La Gitana," he grimly muttered below his breath as he guardedly tried the rear entrance, to find it locked. "It's not so hard, either, to guess who laid the wires. Chandler built and owns the house. Chandler engaged you to show here. Chandler has a double end to win in fastening the murder of Bailey Thorpe on the rancher, his rival in love. And by boiling all these facts down together, Chandler is the real power behind the throne."

"How to prove it all? Well, I reckon La Gitana might be induced to peach, if the right sort of pinching was—"

Grip-sack Sid never finished that sentence.

He was turning away from the rear entrance, and just as he came to the corner of the building two dark figures leaped out of the shadows and assaulted him, both striking vicious blows, both making their aim sure, for without even a groan or a moan, the Sample Sport fell to the ground in a limp and nerveless heap.

"Like a mice!" grimly chuckled one of the ruffians, as his sinewy fingers closed tightly about the throat of his victim.

"Wrop his cabeza up in this, then," curtly growled his comrade in crime, snatching up a rough horse-blanket from the ground. "Member, they ain't no signs to be left layin' round loose, the boss said."

"He ain't bleedin' none to hurt, but hev it that way fer me," coolly said the other, relaxing his deadly grip as he felt not a sign of lingering life. "Wrop 'im up, an' then ketch holt; quicker we git to the hosses, the sooner we'll clean airn our wages."

His face and head muffled in the blanket, Grip-sack Sid was caught up, shoulders and feet, by the two ruffians, and hurriedly carried back to where a couple of horses stood in waiting. One man mounted behind the saddle, lifting as his mate pushed, quickly sitting their victim in the saddle, then both rode rapidly away from Round-up City.

No pause was made until the high bank of the river was gained, when Grip-sack Sid was picked up by shoulders and feet, given a couple of swings back and forth, then cast out and down to find a watery grave.

"Good-by, John!" laughed his assassins.

CHAPTER XXX.

LA GITANA CALLS ON IMO.

"You wished to see me, I understand?" hesitated Imo Thorpe, as she gazed curiously, almost doubtfully at the dark-clad, heavily veiled figure that rose from a seat at her entrance.

It was well along in the afternoon of the day following that interrupted performance at the Opera House in Round-up City, and Imo had been surprised from a troubled sleep in which mental more than physical exhaustion took part, by the announcement that a strange lady was below, with an urgent request to see her for a few moments.

Rising and bathing her face, Imo descended, to find one whom she utterly failed to identify by garb or figure, for her face was hidden behind a veil with folds too thick for even a keen eye to penetrate.

"You are Miss Imo Thorpe?" asked a deep, musical voice, the first notes of which sent a strange thrill through the young lady, for it instantly brought back a picture of a darkened stage and a queenly-form garbed in somber black, wand in hand before the circle of light.

"I am. And you are—"

"La Gitana, for the present, and to all save you, Miss Thorpe," the woman quickly interposed, throwing back her veil and revealing her face. "Do not spurn me—do not drive me away without hearing the words I have come here to speak!" she murmured, her tones husky, her face full of a pathetic pleading, her hands clasped and her knees giving signs of an impulse to kneel before the startled maiden.

"I don't understand—you frighten me!" faltered Imo, shrinking back with a vague fear of impending evil.

"Pardon—a thousand pardons, dear lady," and La Gitana seemed even more agitated, even while striving to control her emotions. "If you would not see me die at your door, I pray you do not drive me away until I have settled these horrible doubts—this haunting fear of—pardon me, I implore you!"

She caught Imo by the hands, lifting them to her lips, then gazing imploringly into her face as if to read her fate.

"What is the matter?" and Imo shook her hands free, stepping back still further. "You are not—"

"Insane?" supplied La Gitana, a sad, wan smile briefly lighting up her dark face. "No—worse luck for me! The insane do not suffer as those can suffer with unimpaired memory. I am sane, and if you will graciously grant me a private interview—"

"We are quite alone in here," a little coldly interrupted the lady of the ranch, adding in an afterthought: "Quite alone, though I can summon others in an instant, if needs be."

"Am I so dangerous? Am I such a desperate-seeming person, then?"

"You are a stranger to me, madam, and last night—"

"It is because of what happened last night that I am here to-day," quickly cried La Gitana, her dark face glowing, her eyes filling with a curious light. "I beg you will take me where I can talk freely, without fear of having my sad story caught by other ears. I ask it as a measureless boon—I ask it in the name of Rex Pollard!"

With a swift advance La Gitana softly whispered that name close to the ear of the shrinking maiden, but its effect was magical.

Instantly rallying, Imo Thorpe offered a hand, saying:

"Come with me to my chamber. I will listen to your story."

Very quiet and even her tone, but La Gitana smiled as she felt how that little hand quivered, how rapidly the pulse beat under her sly fingertip.

Imo led the way to her room, closing and turning the key as she followed La Gitana inside.

The moment the door was closed and she found her interview an assured fact, the manner of La Gitana changed like magic. From the pleading, tearful suppliant, she became the keen, steady woman of the world.

Taking from a pocket a number of newspaper clippings, all treating of the mysterious case of Bailey Thorpe, she dropped them into the lap of the maiden, seating herself again and frankly speaking:

"I suppose I ought to beg pardon for daring to try a bit of my trade upon you down-stairs, Miss Thorpe, but so much depended on my gaining your private ear, that I dared the risk. You will forgive me?"

Imo started, turning still paler, something strongly akin to fear in her eyes as she gazed at that darkly handsome face.

"Then you—you only know of Mr. Pollard through these?" her trembling fingers stirred the clippings.

"As Rex Pollard—yes," frankly admitted La Gitana, but quickly adding: "If I am on the right track—if what I heard and saw last night prove to be true, as I now believe, then I used to know Mr. Pollard under a different name!"

"You mean—then those shameful pictures last night were all a trick—a cruel trick to entrap an innocent and bitterly persecuted gentle-

man?" cried Imo, springing to her feet with flushing face and flashing eyes.

"As Heaven is my judge, I know no more about them than you do!" earnestly cried La Gitana, lifting her right hand as though to register the assertion.

Imo glanced irresolutely toward the door, as though more than half-tempted to open the barrier and call for help; but before she could so determine, words from her strange visitor again checked her.

"If you hope to ever clear the name of Rex Pollard from the stain which, right or wrong, now hangs over it, Miss Thorpe, you will not act on blind impulse. Listen to the explanation which I came here to give, even as I hoped to receive one in turn. Then you can turn me from your presence with blows and cursings, if you think I really merit them."

"I will hear you through," bowed Imo, regaining control of her nerves, sinking back into her seat once more. "You say you once knew Mr. Pollard when he was known by another name?"

"I have reason to think so," with a brief bow, glancing toward the bits of paper still lying on the floor. "Mr. Rex Pollard has lost the thumb of his left hand?"

"Through an accident—yes."

"So had the man I used to know!" flashed La Gitana, slipping a hand into her bosom and producing a card sized photograph, which she held up before Imo's eyes. "Does Rex Pollard look anything like this picture? Of course making allowance for added years. This was taken nearly seven years ago."

There was a strong resemblance, and Imo leaned far forward the better to trace the likeness—to start back as she made what might prove to be an important discovery.

"Can you say where that photograph was taken, and by whom, madam?" she asked, with an effort calming her voice, though the vivid light in her eyes might have betrayed her to a close observer.

"I can," nodded La Gitana. "It is a reduced copy of a large crayon," just the ghost of a smile flitting across her mobile lips.

The light dimmed in Imo's eyes, for her supposed discovery seemed as naught now.

"It is not the picture from which that shadow was cast, last night," she said, forcing down her emotions as best she could. "That was a perfect representation of Mr. Pollard as he now is. Why did you not bring that likeness, instead?"

"Because I never saw either it or its shadow," coolly replied La Gitana. "You doubt me still, I see, Miss Thorpe?"

"Why should I not?" passionately. "Dare you deny that you or your companion cast those horrible pictures on the screen, last night?"

"I dare, simply because it is the truth. Neither Professor King nor myself had hand in that part of the play. If you were present, as of course you must have been, though I cannot remember having noticed you among the audience, you must have seen how I beat a retreat when the cowboys robbed me of my office as lecturer?"

Imo simply bowed assent, trying the while to read what might lay behind that dusky mask.

"I had scarcely passed behind the scenes when some person or persons assaulted me, choking me blind, then forcing me to inhale chloroform. After that I know nothing more, until after the horrible riot was nearly at an end. And as I then learned, Professor King was treated almost as badly; knocked senseless, bound, gagged and muffled."

Despite her strong suspicion, Imo could hardly avoid believing La Gitana as she rapidly told this part of her story. Unless the woman was a truly superb actress, she must be telling the plain truth.

"Then how do you explain those following pictures? Who could have cast them on the screen?"

La Gitana shook her head, frowning darkly.

"I know no more than the dead! Possibly a detective has struck the same clew that brought me here in quest of the maimed hand!"

"Why are you searching for Rex Pollard? What can he be to you?" Imo forced herself to ask, breathlessly awaiting an answer.

"Nothing, now," was the cold reply, "but once he was my husband!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A WOMAN'S REVENGE.

IMO THORPE shrunk back with a faint, choking cry, her guard completely broken down by that wholly unexpected blow. Of all words, those were the ones she was least prepared to hear.

"Your husband!" she gasped, one hand seeking her heart, the other clasping her furiously throbbing temples.

La Gitana nodded assent, with a hard, pitiless smile coming into her dusky face.

"It is false—he was never—he could never—"

"Your Rex Pollard might not, but mine—Satan himself could show no more cruelty, more duplicity where those too weak to punish him physically were concerned. The one question for us to decide is whether your Rex Pollard and the man I once called husband are one and

the same, Miss Thorpe," steadily said La Gitana, bending forward and quickly collecting those scattered excerpts.

This occupied but a few moments, but during that brief interval Imo Thorpe fought hard to regain her scattered wits, and partially succeeded.

Like a revelation there passed before her those dastardly blows aimed at the life and honor of the man whom she had learned to love long before the sunshine changed to clouds, and she felt that this was only another and more subtle attack against her faith.

She would listen to all this woman had to say, and then it should be her task to prove the tale false and malicious.

"Go on, if you please, madam," Imo spoke, as La Gitana resumed her seat. "I promised to hear what you had to say, and I'll make my word good. Unless you transgress too far!"

La Gitana smiled slightly at that curt sentence, betraying so fully how slight dependence Imo could as yet place on her nerves, but like a prudent woman she let it pass by without remark.

"I will try and keep within safe bounds, Miss Thorpe, and when you come to fairly understand the cause of my visit to you, here, I think you will be less suspicious, less cold and hard in your treatment of one whose worse fault is that—like you, she is a woman!"

"If I have wronged you, I will freely apologize, madam."

"Years ago—nearly eight, to be accurate—I first met a man who became my lover, wooing me in a fiercely sweet fashion, so different from anything I had ever known or dreamed of before. Never mind what his name was, then. Enough that he was the original of the picture I showed you a bit ago."

"Mr. Pollard, you mean?"

"That was not his name, then; if it is his name now, he has cast the old one aside. Let me tell my little story, then it rests with you whether or no that doubt is ever solved."

"With me?" echoed Imo, perplexed. "I don't understand how that can be. You must speak more clearly, madam!"

La Gitana flung out a shapely hand, frowning a bit as though impatient at these interruptions. "Pray bear with me, Miss Thorpe, and you will get at the whole truth just that much the more quickly. My time is limited, and if I am to accomplish aught by my visit to you, my tongue must run nimbly."

Imo Thorpe sunk back in her chair, a finger on her lips, a steady light filling her eyes as they rested on that dusky beautiful face.

Those interruptions had not been purely idle. She was collecting her wits, her nerves, fighting for that cool alertness through which alone she could hope to sift truth from fiction.

"I was wooed and won by this man of whom I spoke," resumed La Gitana, speaking rapidly, her lids half closed and her head slightly bowed as though watching the strong, supple hands lying interlocked upon her lap. "And for one brief, blissful year, I lived in an earthly paradise."

"He was very fond of me, this man; so passionately fond that at times his fierce love almost frightened me, and I even caught myself wishing that he would cool down a little and act more like other husbands whom we knew. Poor fool!" with a short, bitter laugh. "How little I thought that the fire was already on the point of expiring!"

"Near the close of that first year, a little child came to us, and then I knew no woman under the canopy was so perfectly happy, so supremely blessed as I!"

"Within three months, I did not have to complain of my husband's ardor. Inside of six, I was the one to fawn and plead for a caress!"

"Before the second anniversary of our wedding came around, I was widowed and childless—not by death; that would have been better for us all, in the end. My husband fled from me, taking our child with him, leaving behind no positive clue, as we at first believed."

"A long spell of illness kept me confined to my rooms, but I had relatives, then, who poured out money like water in trying to recover my little babe. I did not ask for him—my love had died when I read the cruel note which he left behind him for me."

"And long before I recovered my health, the truth came out. My husband was a criminal, born and bred. He had been a prominent member of a robber band even while spending his honeymoon with me. And one cause for his sudden flight proved to be a heavy bank robbery which he had planned and helped to execute!"

"And you claim this criminal is none other than Rex Pollard?" slowly asked Imo, her flashing eyes belying her forced calmness of speech.

"I claim nothing more than I expect to fully prove," quietly replied La Gitana. "I hope, for your sake, that it may turn out to be no more than one of those remarkable resemblances which do occasionally turn up. But bear in mind that the man who stole away my child also had his left hand robbed of its thumb!"

"That was what first turned my attention toward Rack-about Range. I read of the sad tragedy, and heard that the once suspected

criminal was so marked. It was a mere chance that I struck the trail, for when I saw the first note of the affair, the paper containing it was nearly eight months old!"

"Many changes had taken place during those long years, which I ought to touch upon, perhaps, to make my course perfectly clear to you, Miss Thorpe. I'll bunch them as compactly as possible, not to try your patience too far."

"My richest relative lost his fortune by a single stroke. Sickness robbed me of the others. I was left almost alone to keep up the search which had already grown almost hopeless—it would have been wholly so to any other than a mother."

"That was all I cared for—to rescue my baby from the cruel villain. I had long since procured a divorce from him, as a confirmed criminal."

"To give me a better chance to pass from place to place, searching for my child, I took to the stage, becoming what you now see me. And when I finally chanced across that stray paper, and idly glancing over it, to see a full description of Rex Pollard, a man with a mutilated left hand, a man who had barely escaped being lynched for murder, it seemed to me that at last fate had put vengeance into my hands!"

"You came here to destroy him?"

"I came here to make sure that Rex Pollard of whom I read was indeed the man who had darkened my entire life!" was the swift amendment. "I came here to demand my child at his hands, with a knife in one hand, an olive-branch in the other."

"If he would restore my boy, I would consent to bury the past and go away from here keeping the secret of his past crimes. If he refused to do this, or if he was unable to give me my child, I meant to lay bare his evil record and leave him to suffer the penalty."

"He was at the show last night; did you recognize him?"

"If he was among the audience, he kept his face hidden from me, and you may be sure I used my eyes with all their power. I began to think I had failed, when I was so brutally assaulted on the stage."

"Do you accuse Mr. Pollard of that, too?"

"I accuse no one," was the cold reply. "It may have been him or his tools, but if it had, I believe I would never have recovered my senses. I can only fall back on what I hinted; there must be a detective at work on the case, unknown to me, perhaps hoping to convict the murderer of your father by taking him off his guard, through those painted slides."

"You spoke of proofs which would convict Mr. Pollard, even to his best and firmest friends, I think, madam?"

"I think I kept within bounds in saying so," bowed La Gitana as she took an open envelope from her bosom, but keeping it back while she continued to speak: "And that brings me to my main reason for daring to intrude upon you, Miss Thorpe."

"It is not my fault that, in asking cautious questions about this mysterious tragedy, I learned more or less accurately how nearly you had been connected with the man whom I suspected of being my divorced husband. But it would have lain heavily at my door if I had heard without resolving to save another woman from suffering what I had suffered, through the plausible arts of a heartless villain."

Imo flushed angrily, but before she could utter her resentment at this uncalled for sympathy, La Gitana placed an open sheet of newspaper on her lap, saying:

"I found that note in my room at the hotel last night. I beg that you will read it and—You recognize the hand, then?" with an eager flash filling her dusky eyes as she saw that paling face change.

Imo made no reply, for she did recognize the hand; or if not genuine, it was an admirable imitation of Rex Pollard's writing.

"LA GITANA:—"

"I can guess your object in coming here, and am ready to meet you more than half-way. The kid is— That depends on how closely you have kept your lips sealed, my lady!"

"If you want an interview, come with your brother to Three Mile Motte, where I'll meet you, to see if a compromise can't be effected."

"I will be at the rendezvous at eight o'clock, tomorrow night, and unless I find you there, I'll know it is to be a fight to the death between you and me. How that must end, you ought to be able to guess, from your past experience with—"

"HONEY BEE."

La Gitana laughed faintly as she saw Imo reach that signature, and there was a trace of embarrassment in her voice as she said:

"If I had doubted its authorship, that silly name would have convinced me that it came from the man I once called husband. I used to call him that, because—well, he was always kissing, and he used to declare he was only seeking for honey!"

Imo shivered violently, and cast the note from her as though the venomous hissing of a serpent came to her through each of those boldly written lines.

La Gitana secured the paper, placing it in her bosom, speaking in colder yet very earnest

tones as she rose from her chair as though she felt her duty was nearing an end.

"You can readily guess why I troubled you with this call, now, Miss Thorpe. I am going to keep this rendezvous in company with my brother, Professor King, to stick to his stage name. I know that this note was written by the man whom I once called husband. I believe he can be none other than the man you know best as Rex Pollard."

"I do not—I will not believe it!" panted Imo, painfully.

"Would it not be better to solve all doubts, either for good or ill?" sharply uttered La Gitana, moving toward the door. "If I were in your place, I'd risk all to know all! I'd go to Three Mile Motte and both see and hear for myself. If you are afraid, take a guard with you, though that might lend alarm to the man I feel is my husband."

"This is what I would do, but you may decide different. At least I've done my duty in warning you, and now I'll go."

Like one in a waking dream Imo bore her company down-stairs and watched her ride rapidly away with Professor King as escort.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHAT IMO FOUND AT THREE MILE MOTTE.

LATE that afternoon Imo Thorpe left the Diamond Cross on Dandy, parting from her cousin with a bright smile and a cheery laugh, as she made light of his half-serious warnings against another ducking in Roaring Fork.

But as she passed out of sight, where no curious eyes could note her changing countenance, it showed plain traces of long and troubled thought.

Left alone by La Gitana, the poor girl had tried to clear away the tangles, to see her way clear through the labyrinth which was growing more and more intricate with every step she took forward.

She could not bring herself to believe that Rex Pollard was indeed the black rascal painted by La Gitana, and yet—

That picture was very like what he must have been a number of years ago. That note was a perfect copy of lines he had written to her when the trouble first arose between her poor father and her lover.

Her whole mind was turned toward him, and she never once thought of possible danger to herself, never once suspected that perhaps this was a blow aimed at her alone.

Why should she? Who was there in all Rack-about Range who had cause for harming her?

She did think of asking Will Thorpe to bear her company, when she first got so far as to believe it possible she might go to Three Mile Motte, but the idea was abandoned as soon as formed. If it should be true—if Rex Pollard was really the dastardly criminal La Gitana feared—it would only make the discovery harder for her to bear if another shared her knowledge.

Under other circumstances, or with her brain in its usual clear working state, Imo Thorpe would never have rushed so blindly into what seemed on the face of it a clumsy trap set to ensnare her; but in simple justice the reader should try to remember all she had suffered of late, and how terribly her nerves must have been strained.

Having once fully decided to try and witness that alleged interview, Imo only gave thought to how she might best accomplish her purpose without risk of alarming the man who made that assignment.

He said he would be at the motte at eight o'clock that evening; then she must reach there long enough to hide her horse near by, and secure for herself a snug covert where she might escape detection.

The sun was near its setting as the maiden rode up to Three Mile Motte, intending to first make sure it was unoccupied, then take Dandy away to a place of concealment, to steal back and hide herself; but she had barely reached the edge of the timber island, when two lasses shot out and secured both her horse and herself.

"Choke the critter down, an' haul 'im out o' sight!" cried Tick Slater, as he gave a vicious tug to his own rope, rapidly running up it to snatch the revolver from Imo's hand before her benumbed fingers could bring the weapon to bear or fire a single shot. "Steady, you! Come to me arms, honey bird o' sweet delight!"

Imo uttered one piercing shriek as those bony arms fairly tore her from the saddle, but ere she could do more, a foul palm was tightly clasped about her throat, and she was borne into cover.

She fought desperately, but in vain. Tick Slater was resolved to make sure work on this occasion, and he would not fail through mistaken gallantry.

"What the boss wants of a scratch-cat like her, durned ef I'll tell ye, pard!" he growled, viciously, as he brushed a hasty hand across his scratched and bleeding face, having securely bound and gagged his captive. "Got the hoss 'bout ready?"

"Bet I hev, jest!" came the prompt reply.

"Lucky the boss didn't see the way you rumbled up the gal, pard! You'd feel the Black Hawk's beak mighty piert, reckon!"

"Wouldn't be much wuss then her claws," with a sulky growl. "But we want to skin out o' this in a holy hurry, pard! Fetch up the hoss."

Imo was lifted into her own saddle, then securely bound in an erect position, the cords including the saddle in such a manner that an accidental or voluntary fall was out of the question.

This done, with a halter leading from each side of Dandy and held by the two ruffians, the little party left Three Mile Motte and rode at a brisk pace across the plain toward the distant hills.

Imo never entirely lost her consciousness, and a few minutes of that brisk riding through the cooling evening air, restored her wits and steadied her nerves. She felt now that she had been cruelly deceived by La Gitana, and though she could not divine the reason, and though she knew evil must be intended her, during those first few minutes she felt lighter hearted and happier than for many a long day.

"He is innocent! She lied about him—my love, my hero!"

That was the song she was singing in her heart.

Rex Pollard was nothing to that evil woman. She had bitterly wronged him in even for an instant doubting his purity and honor, but surely he would forgive her when she told him it was her passionate love that urged her on to clear his fair fame by the only means left at her command?

So entirely absorbed was she in her new-found joy and relief, that Imo gave her captors precious little trouble, hardly hearing a word of their talk as they pressed rapidly on toward the broken region bordering that side of the plain.

It was well along toward midnight when that rapid journey came to an end, the horses being halted at the base of a rugged slope, Tick Slater taking charge of them while his comrade lifted Imo from the saddle and carried her up the hill, shortly after crowding through a thick fringe of bushes and plunging downward a few feet into utter darkness.

"Take it easy, gal, an' I'll mighty soon hev a glimmer," grunted the rascal as he lowered his fair burden to what seemed a sand-covered flooring of solid rock. "Tain't the palace which I reckon the boss'd ruther take ye to fu'st off, but ther things can't al'ays pan out like a critter'd perfar most."

By the time Tick Slater came in a rude lantern and a small fire had both been kindled, dimly lighting up the rocky den, for it was hardly capacious enough to deserve the name of cavern.

"Look ye, ma'am," said Slater, as he gave a grunt of pain at having to lend his wounded form over to reach her bonds. "You're safe an' gwine fer to be treated like a royal queen, but the boss said we was to ketch an' keep ye tight, an' what the boss says is Gospel law to us. An' that bein' so, you'll save us trouble and you inconvenience ef you take what hes to come 'thout any more kickin' then you kin help."

"I'm gwine to let ye go free, down to your dainty huffs, but ef you try to come any rusty tricks—waal, we'll jest hev to truss ye up ag'in, that's all."

Though her lips were now free from the gag, Imo Thorpe said nothing. She knew that Tick Slater had been drinking heavily, from his foul breath, and she had a faint hope that by feigning resignation, she might in the end be able to give them the slip.

"Reckon she'll find it softer settin' over hyar, pard," grunted the other ruffian; not Dan West, as might have been the case only for the severe hurts he had received two nights before, but another rascal in every way worthy to fill his shoes.

Slater lifted their captive to the rude but fairly comfortable pallet which his mate had been arranging, and with a faint sigh Imo sunk down upon it, timidly murmuring:

"I thank you for so much, gentlemen. The more kindly you treat me, the larger will be the reward my relatives will pay you for my ransom. It is for money that you have captured me!"

"Reckon that's it, ma'am," grinned Slater, with a facetious wink at his comrade. "Work-in' fer wages, we is. Eh, pard?"

"Bet yer boots," grunted his mate, rummaging in his pockets for pipe and tobacco. "An' I'm gwine to keep all-eyes-open the night through, so she won't slip away an' bring our pay down to heap sight more kicks then dollars—/bel?"

He turned away and squatted down close to the entrance, and shortly after Tick Slater dropped down beside him, bottle in hand.

Through her partly closed lids Imo watched them drink in turn until her faint hopes rose higher. If they would only get drunk or swallow enough to make them sleep soundly!

To encourage this lack of guard she soon after began to breathe louder, counterfeiting sleep so admirably that even Tick Slater seemed de-

ceived when he stole cautiously to her side to inspect her.

"Sleepin' like a wore-out baby!" he chuckled, returning to his former position. "We kin chatter all we like now, pard."

"What you reckon set the boss off in sech a holy hurry?"

"Skeered out by his ole woman turnin' up, I reckon—Lodge-e-tanny, ye know! Ef he traps her, she'll croak; then Pollard 'll come to resky this'ne, an' we'll git drunk at the weddin'—bet yer ole socks!"

CHAPTER XXXIII. THE SEED TAKES ROOT.

CHANCE, or a carefully welded chain of events, as the case might prove, prevented a premature alarm at the disappearance of Imo Thorpe.

Chester Thorpe was acting as referee in an interesting case of rival brands, or the rightful ownership thereof, and as all parties interested in the matter were eager to have the dispute satisfied as quickly as possible, the session held that day lasted much longer than usual.

As was his custom ever since the murder of his uncle, Will Thorpe started early enough to join his father before the old gentleman should take saddle for his ride back to Diamond Cross, to act as a guard against another foul crime.

Thus it came about that it was almost midnight when father and son reached home, and they never once suspected aught was wrong when Imo failed to meet and greet them as usual.

It was a little unusual not to find Imo waiting for them in the dining-room, too, and Chester Thorpe frowned a bit as he noted her absence the next morning; but Will gently said:

"The little lady has had much to bear of late, father. You know what happened at the Opera House."

"Confound that young rascal, anyway! If I was a few years younger, blessed if I wouldn't—really think he was honest in his parting words, do you, Will?"

"I really do," was the grave reply. "I have never been quite able to believe Pollard could have done so foul a deed, though a man with his terrible temper is mighty uncertain. And if he wasn't thoroughly in earnest when he declared he would—What is it, Martha?"

"Please, sir, I can't—" stammered the girl, uneasily.

"You went to call Miss Imo?"

"But I couldn't git no answer, sir, and I'm—"

"The child's sick—sick, and we here stuffing like—Ride for a doctor, Will, you infernal slug-gard!" spluttered Chester Thorpe, upsetting his chair and almost overturning the breakfast table as he sprung to his feet.

"Steady, father!" cried Will, a restraining hand on the arm of the excitable old gentleman. "There's nothing worse the matter than a little sounder sleep than ordinary. The poor girl doubtless lay awake until late, brooding over her troubles, then sunk into a sleep of exhaustion."

"Then—what the deuce do you mean, you wench?" wheeling angrily upon the startled maid. "How dare you come and spoil my breakfast by telling such audacious—Will, lad?"

"Yes, father," the young man responded, pausing with a hand on the opening door.

"Where the deuce you going to now? I thought Imo mustn't be roused up until she had her sleep out?"

"By breaking her door down and overturning half the house, as you were about to do, I meant, father," laughed Will, leaving the room and springing swiftly up the stairs, pausing at Imo's door before his father could fairly realize how he had been circumvented.

But there came no response to his knockings, and Chester Thorpe was in ample time to witness the opening of that chamber door. And of the two, Will was probably quite as badly flustered as his choleric father, when he drove a foot heavily against the door, close to the lock.

The barrier flung open with a crash, but not a sound of fright or indignation came from beyond it, and Will turned deathly sick at heart as he saw that the bed had not been slept in that night last past.

"Look for a clew, father!" he cried hoarsely, as he turned away. "I'll see if Dandy is in his stall."

Dandy was not in his stall, nor was there anything to tell of his having been there through the night. And fearing the worst, Will Thorpe rushed to where the bell-tower stood, grasping the knotted rope and causing a brazen alarm to thunder far and wide.

"Will—come here!"

It was Chester Thorpe calling, his face nearly purple, his fat hand violently shaking a paper in the air.

For an instant Will Thorpe hoped that all was to turn out well, but as he saw his father's contorted features, he knew that even worse than he had dared think lay behind this sudden vanishment.

"Gone, Will—gone with that—Heaven's blackest curses cover him from now through all eternity!" gasped the old man, reeling back and

kept from falling heavily only by the ready arm of his son.

Will bore him into the dining-room, then snatched time to run his eyes over the note which he had caught as it fell from those temporarily unnerved fingers.

It was brief, without address or signature, and simply begged Imo Thorpe to meet the writer that evening at Three Mile Motte, as he had gained a positive clew to the murderer of her father, but dared not call at the Diamond Cross Ranch to deliver it into her hands.

A fierce oath hissed through the young man's lips, for he, too, at once recognized that bold, rather peculiar handwriting, and never once did he suspect that it might prove to be a cunning forgery.

"Kill the cur, boy!" faintly cried Chester Thorpe, as he saw his son turn toward him, where Martha and the housekeeper were ministering to the stricken gentleman.

"Imo first, him after," grimly responded the young man, his face very white but his eyes glowing like coals of fire. "You're not very bad, father?"

"I'm all right—go, boy! Bring her back—bring him—to the gallows!"

Even then, with so much lying ready for his hand and brains to accomplish, Will Thorpe paused long enough to make sure his father was in no danger, the dreaded paralytic shock being nothing more than a fit of vertigo brought on by his grief and great rage.

Satisfied on that point, Will Thorpe left his father to the care of the women, hastening out to join the cowboys who were hastily gathering from all points, roused to swift action by the alarm-bell.

"We fear an accident has happened to Miss Thorpe," was the only explanation he stopped to give them as he flung a saddle on his horse. "Three Mile Motte is our first point."

Several of the cowboys, being already mounted, got away in advance of their young boss, but before half the distance was covered, Will Thorpe was well in the lead. He rode light, and though ordinarily very considerate of his mounts, this day he rode with bloody spur.

When his men came up, he was on foot, staring down at the torn and trampled earth, here kept a little moister by the friendly shade of the trees.

Young though he was, Will Thorpe had learned many a shrewd lesson of plain and wood craft, and those few marks told his trained eyes a story that partly soothed even while it maddened him.

Imo had kept that appointment: yonder was her footprint, plainly outlined where the leaves were brushed aside and the earth loosened. There glittered a breastpin which he knew she had worn on the day before, doubtless loosened from her dress by her fight for freedom. And close beside her track was another, the high-heeled boot of a man.

Will roused himself as his men came rushing up, and more to gain a brief space for thought, he bade them alight and search the timber for other sign.

"She came here to meet that devil!" he forced himself to reason, choking back his fierce passions until he could view the case from all sides. "She *did* meet him. His alleged clew was but an excuse to draw the poor girl here, away from all help. He doubtless tried to coax her into running away with him. Of course she refused. Then the cowardly cur used force—the hell-hound overpowered and carried her off—but where?"

Just as he reached this point, Will Thorpe was startled by a loud, clear cheer coming from over the plain, and glancing in that direction he caught sight of a number of horsemen, foremost among whom he recognized Lee Chandler.

"Will be—can he know anything about it?" flashed like lightning through the brain of the young ranchero, only to send him into the saddle with a swift bound, a single yell bringing the Diamond Cross cowboys flocking toward their leader.

"Halloo! have you found him, Thorpe?" cried Chandler, hastening his horse, closely followed by a good-sized dog.

"Found whom?"

"The panther, rumor says, has been prowling about this grove, of course," came the instant reply. "I've a big bet up that my dog can take its trail and not only run it down, but whip it in a fight to the finish. Hope you haven't killed him, Thorpe?"

"Not yet," with a hard, merciless laugh as he wheeled his horse and dashed at breakneck speed over the plain, heading in the direction of the Shuttlecock Ranch.

"What's bit him?" cried Chandler, intercepting one of the cowboys before he could join his mates in following his young master.

"Miss Imy gone—stole by that durned Pollard, reckon!" was all the sturdy fellow deigned to answer, and only a deft touch of rein and spur prevented Cap from being bodily ridden down by the headlong cowboy as he drove his mount forward with bloody spurs.

Will Thorpe never once looked back to see if, or by whom he was being followed. Though his face looked so white and cold, set hard as a rock,

his blood was on fire, and if he could have met Rex Pollard in those first few minutes, it would have been a death-grapple between them, without word or warning from Thorpe's side.

Not for an instant did he doubt the perfect correctness of the conclusion he had arrived at.

Despairing of winning by fair means, Rex Pollard had decoyed her to that lone spot, and failing to coax her to an elopement, he had forcibly borne her away—whither?

Even in his madness, Will Thorpe hardly dared hope that Pollard would be found at the Shuttlecock.

The events at the opening of the new Opera House had doubtless alarmed him. After those terribly realistic pictures he must know that an avenger was following hot on the trail, and with this final blow he would surely flee the country?

"But not so fast or so far that I can't catch up!" grated the young ranchero through his clenched teeth. "And then—"

The sentence was left unuttered, but it was plainly printed on his white face and in his glowing eyes. Rex Pollard would meet with little mercy from his hands when the meeting should take place.

That was a wild, breathless, headlong race, and Will Thorpe left his swiftest cowboy far behind him by the time he came in fair sight of the Shuttlecock; but he never once gave thought to that. If he could only meet Rex Pollard—if he might only find that demon at home—he would force the whole truth from him though a score of armed men stood at his back, and he single-handed.

Though he saw several cowboys lounging about the place as he rode up on his panting, foam-covered steed, Will Thorpe did not give them a second glance, a second thought, but headed straight for the front entrance, uttering a hoarse, snarling cry as he saw a tall, dark figure come to the open door.

He recognized Rex Pollard, and leaping from his horse without taking time to draw rein, he bounded forward and hurled himself straight at the throat of the astonished ranchero.

"Imo—where is she, you devil?" he snarled, as his hands shot out for the throat of the supposed kidnapper.

But Rex Pollard caught his arms, forcing him back with resistless power, sharply crying:

"What do you mean? Are you crazy, Will Thorpe?"

With angry yells, the cowboys came rushing forward, pistols in hand.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN MERCILESS HANDS.

His mad grip broken, Will Thorpe staggered back, little more than a child in that struggle with the tall ranchero, but with a mad cry he jerked a revolver from its scabbard.

"Back, boys!" thundered Pollard, even as he leaped forward and with a deft hand disarmed his youthful adversary. "I'll kill the first to lift a hand against my friend!"

"You devil!" panted Will, hoarsely, once more leaping at the throat of his enemy. "Imo—give her up, or I'll tear your heart out!"

With hardly a seeming effort, Rex Pollard tore those frantic hands from his throat, holding the youth helpless while he sharply said:

"Are you really gone crazy, Thorpe? What has happened? I've not seen Miss Thorpe since you parted us that night."

"They's a hull string o' critters comin', boss," cried one of his cowboys in warning. "They're his men—an' they've got guns out an' ready fer hot work, too! Shell we let 'em hev it, boss?"

Rex Pollard took time for a hasty glance that showed him a number of armed men rapidly coming up along the track of Will Thorpe, and for an instant the light of battle filled his dark eyes. Only to die out as swiftly.

He at once released Will, folding his empty hands over his swelling bosom as he calmly said:

"I swear to you I'm innocent of any wrong deed, Will Thorpe. Now kill me if you see fit."

"You stole away my poor cousin—"

"You lie when you say so!" flashed Pollard, then sharply crying out to his men: "Hands empty, lads! This is not a matter to be settled by shooting."

"No—by the rope, curse you!" cried Will, gripping the ranchero once more.

"I surrender to you, Mr. Thorpe," coldly said Pollard, making no further effort to resist. "For your men's sake bid them keep fingers off trigger. My boys shall not chip in unless they have to defend themselves."

"Or you, boss! Say the word an' we'll clean the hull dern outfit, like a mice!" cried one bold fellow.

"I say the word—*quiet!*" sternly commanded the ranchero. "I have surrendered to meet any and all charges which may be brought against me. Don't make a bad matter worse by giving them a chance to murder me without a show to clear my good name."

By this time nearly all of the men from the Diamond Cross had come up, and at a signal from their young leader, they gathered about him and his prisoner, every man with weapon in readiness for use.

The Shuttlecocks, fully as strong in numbers, hung sulkily around, eager to tear their master from those merciless hands, yet held helpless by that master's own stern commands.

Half-crazed though he was, Will Thorpe could see that he owed his own life to that very forbearance; he knew that at any time since his first coming, Rex Pollard held his life in his own hands; and the reflection helped to calm him down in a measure, though he never once wavered in his belief that his poor cousin had been abducted against her will by this dark-faced miscreant.

A word sent several men to searching the Shuttlecock, while Will tried to get Pollard to admit the kidnapping and to confess where he had taken Imo.

"Before Heaven I know naught of her, Will Thorpe," declared Pollard, shivering like a leaf as he at last realized what a misfortune had befallen the maiden whom he loved with all his soul. "You're only wasting precious time here. For Heaven's sake, man!" with sharp anguish in face and voice, "believe me! Go to her aid and—"

"She's safe from harm so long as I've got my grip on you!" doggedly uttered the young man. "And I'll keep that grip until I've twisted the whole truth from your lips, or until I've killed you!"

The search of the Shuttlecock brought naught to light, and then Will Thorpe ordered his men to the saddle, himself looking after the prisoner, testing each turn of his bonds with jealous care.

Once more only the powerful influence of Rex Pollard over his hot-blooded men prevented an attempt at a rescue which could only have ended in great bloodshed.

"For the last time—hold, men!" he cried, sternly, though their blind devotion brought dimness into his dark eyes. "I'm innocent; I swear it before high Heaven! But I'd rather die the death of a dog—even on the gallows!—than have one other drop of Thorpe blood shed!"

With Rex Pollard, disarmed, bound beyond the possibility of escape, tied to his horse and inclosed by their force, Will Thorpe left the Shuttlecock and hastened as rapidly as their jaded animals could travel, toward the Diamond Cross.

Not a word did he speak to Rex Pollard during that journey. What had already passed between them was sufficient to convince him that the prisoner would not confess until the last extremity, if even then.

As they drew near the ranch, they saw that Chester Thorpe had not been idle, for quite a crowd of horsemen were in sight, with others rapidly approaching, in answer to the couriers sent out by the ranch-owner with word of the abduction of his relative.

Outwardly cold and unmoved, Rex Pollard listened to their ugly threats as he was lifted from the saddle and led into the house. And only when Chester Thorpe, hardly able to speak articulately from mingled rage and grief, stormed and pleaded, cursing in one breath, in the next praying him to take pity on a broken-hearted uncle, did his forced composure give way.

"As God hears me, Mr. Thorpe, I can't help you in this. I haven't even seen your niece since the night of the show at Round-up. Kill me if you will—I'm ready for that—but send out true men to track the poor child—in God's name, I beg it of you!"

In grim silence Will Thorpe thrust before his eyes the note which had been found in Imo's room, keenly watching his face, as his dark eyes glanced swiftly over the damning words.

"Are we so mighty far off the right trail, Rex Pollard?" he fiercely cried, as the prisoner lifted his eyes.

"It's like my handwriting, but I swear I never wrote a word of it at all!" sternly cried the bound man. "It's a vile forgery, planned to hang an innocent man while the real criminal escapes!"

"Another alibi, no doubt!" bitterly laughed Will Thorpe, crushing the note and hurling it from him. "Twice is once too often, Rex Pollard, and if you let ten little minutes more pass by without making full and true confession, I swear by the mighty God you have been blaspheming, to hang you like a sheep-killing cur on the gallows that marks the spot where Bailey Thorpe fell—by *your* ruthless hand, as I now solemnly believe!"

A storm of wild cheers and wilder yells arose at this fierce speech, and Rex Pollard must have known that there would be no lack of strong hands ready to carry out that terrible sentence unless his confession could clear his skirts of all evil.

But his lips closed tightly. His face grew hard and emotionless as a mask of marble. His gaze never flickered as he watched the quick movements of the second-hand in the watch held before him by Will.

After that first savage outburst, all was silent throughout the gathering; so silent that the faint ticking of the watch could be heard by those within the room.

The time of grace drew near to an end, but Rex Pollard made no sign of yielding. Then Will Thorpe called out coldly:

"Only one minute more. Confess, you villain!" "I am innocent," was the calm, emotionless reply.

"Then we'll see if an innocent man hangs easier than a guilty one!" harshly laughed the young ranchero, putting up his watch, and gripping the prisoner by an arm, turning his face toward the door.

Cold, silent, evidently resigned to his fate, Rex Pollard submitted to those pitiless hands, making no effort to hinder his rapid binding to the saddle of his own good horse. And of all that crowd, as they set out in a gallop for the black gallows which marked the spot where Bailey Thorpe had met an untimely death at the hands of an assassin, not one seemed as calm, as steady nerved as the owner of the Shuttlecock Ranch.

The journey was quickly at an end, and with Rex Pollard sitting directly beneath the arm of the gallows, Will Thorpe once more asked him to confess, only to fail as before.

"I am innocent, before God and high heaven," calmly replied Pollard. "Some day you will know as much, and bring the real criminal to suffer a deserved death where you are now about to murder me!"

Will Thorpe fitted the noose about Pollard's throat, then stepped his horse back, with whip lifted to send the prisoner's steed forward, when a sudden interruption took place.

Yelling and shooting, a man driving a covered wagon came in sight.

CHAPTER XXXV.

GRIP-SACK SID TURNS UP AGAIN.

"ONE—two—three— Good-by, John!" Faintly, indistinctly, almost like one just beginning to emerge from some ugly dream, Grip-sack Sid caught those words, but before he could fairly realize what they meant, he was sent far out over the high bank, to shoot swiftly down into the waters of Roaring Fork.

The shock was severe, and well-nigh completed the dastardly work begun by those two desperadoes, but a healthy man fights hard for his lease on life, even if hardly more than a corpse.

The cool water may have helped, too, but be that as it may, Grip-sack Sid rose to the surface and even made a few mechanical strokes of swimming. Then, through a providential chance, his hand struck against a floating log, and to it he clung with grim tenacity.

His brain seemed on fire, and fearing that he would lose consciousness, to drop from his support and meet sure death beneath the water, Grip-sack Sid managed to loosen his suspenders and tie himself firmly to the float.

That was his last conscious action for he never knew how long.

For mile after mile he floated with the current, his head resting on the rough bark, only that elastic bond holding him from death. And even when the current, at a bend in the river, shot the drift against a pile of other logs and brush and refuse, threatening him with being rolled over and held under the surface, he never consciously worked to save his life.

And yet, he must have done so, for when he woke to reason again, he was free from the log and lying on a sun-warmed sandbar with the pile of driftwood between himself and the water.

The sun was fairly over his head, sending down its genial rays as though it knew how sadly that miserable-looking being needed help. The night had passed, and the day was fully half-spent.

For many minutes longer Grip-sack Sid lay stupidly marveling at his own wretched case. What had happened? Where was he? Who was he?

It had even come to that! He wondered if he were himself, or an entire stranger!

Only for a little while, however.

Bit by bit the past began to come back to him, until he recalled those brightly-colored pictures which some one had thrown upon the canvas screen; then like a flash the past all came back to him.

"Slugged and sent to feed the fishes!" he ejaculated.

From the moment when he turned from the rear door of the Opera House in Round-up, until he was being taken from the saddle on the bank of Roaring Fork, the blank was complete. But he could dimly recall rough handling for a brief space before he was cast into the river.

His belt of arms was gone. His grip-sack had vanished. His pockets were empty, and turned wrong side outward.

"All I've got in return is a head bigger'n a flour barrel!" he grimly laughed, as he concluded that examination.

So far as he could tell, those cowardly blows had not seriously injured the skull, though his scalp was cut deeply, and his brain throbbed as though it must burst through the plates.

The Sample Sport dragged himself to the edge of the water, drinking freely and bathing his head for a long time. That seemed to lend him strength, and tearing a sleeve from his shirt, he wet and bound it tightly about his head.

After a brief rest, he turned away from the water and managed to scale the steep bank, hoping that when he gained the level above he

might be able to espy a friendly stranger, or at least gain some idea as to how far the current had carried him from Round-up City.

Weak, dizzy, faint with the emptiness of his stomach and loss of blood, Grip-sack Sid almost felt like giving up the fight when he failed to see aught around to lend him hope, after gaining the upper level.

The country was perfectly unknown to him. He could see no signs of human life, no token of civilization. Only the rugged hills far away before him.

He could follow the course of the river, and eventually it would take him to the trail along which he had journeyed in going to Round-up; but that must be many miles away, now, and without food or drink, he knew that in his present condition he was unable to stand the strain.

And so, doggedly fighting back his weakness, Grip-sack Sid rose and unsteadily made his way toward those distant hills.

Once there, he could surely procure food of some sort; roots, if nothing better; and after a good night's rest, he would be more like his old self. His brain would not throb so horribly. His wits would grow clearer, his nerves steadier than now.

Grip-sack Sid stuck doggedly to work, and at last reached the edge of the timber, finding his reward almost immediately. He caught sight of a slumbering jack-rabbit, and with a lucky throw, knocked it over with a stone.

He was without means of striking a light, but with an ample supply of food in his possession, that gave him little trouble. He could eat a bit raw, if necessary, and with his worst fears allayed, he began to feel very sleepy.

Scraping together a pile of dry leaves under a shelving rock, he doubled the big hare to serve as a pillow and keep it where loss was out of the question, then dropped off into a dreamless sleep.

It was night when he awoke, with a start and a low cry, staring around him dazedly for a few moments; but only a brief twinge of pain in his head reminded him of his wounds, and that simply led him to a quicker realization of his present situation.

He rose to his feet, rabbit in hand, a low cry parting his lips as he caught sight of the bright glimmer of a camp-fire less than half a mile distant, close by the edge of the timber.

"Fire means hot grub, but maybe it means cold lead, too!" the Sample Sport muttered grimly, checking his first impulse and using caution in approaching the spot.

As he drew nearer, he made out a white-tilted spring wagon, and at least two human figures moving about the fire, apparently engaged in preparing supper. And as he stole still nearer, the blood leaped swiftly through his veins, his gray eyes sparkling vividly.

"It's all coming my way, at last!" he muttered. "La Gitana and the professor, as I'm a sinner!"

As he made that discovery, Grip-sack Sid dropped his precious rabbit, for he knew that better fare lay before him. If he could only win it! If—he had to.

All of his usual strength came back to him, and he stole nearer the wagon, meaning to leap from behind it upon King, trusting to overpower him and snatch a weapon in time to cow La Gitana; but fortunately, perhaps, he was not reduced to that extremity.

He found a loaded Winchester resting against one of the wheels, and with that in hand, the muzzle covering both man and woman, he stepped forth into the red light of the camp-fire, sharply crying:

"Hands up, my darlings! I want you—Belle Mahone!"

"Silver-tongue!" gasped the woman, turning ghastly pale, while her brother mechanically lifted his hands in obedience to that challenge.

"Silver-tongued Sid—exactly!" laughed the Sample Sport, then he sternly bade King pass behind La Gitana and bind her hands behind her back.

There was no attempt at resistance. As though they recognized a Nemesis, the two adventurers meekly yielded to fate.

When La Gitana was bound, Grip-sack Sid forced her brother to lie on the ground, face downward, after which he bound his hands and feet, then left them to chew the bitter cud of reflection while he made a far pleasanter meal off the viands ready cooked to his hands.

After that duty was accomplished, Grip-sack Sid permitted his two captives to eat, while he enjoyed a cigar taken from the professor's private stock, at the same time bluntly placing an alternative before them.

"It's peach or go up, my darlings. It's make a clean breast or bring up in the jug for—well, I reckon I can come mighty near making it a natural lifetime. What's your guess, Belle?"

"And if we do blow the gaff?" sullenly asked the woman.

"That depends on how much you can tell. Has Lee Chandler paid you off, so quick? Has he no further use for you?"

It was Grip-sack Sid driving that covered wagon, yelling and letting off his confiscated re-

peater in his eagerness to save an innocent man from meeting a shameful death on the gallows.

"Hold hard, you infernal idiots!" he screamed, at the top of his voice. "I've got ample proof that Lee Chandler abducted Imo Thorpe, last night, and that he's put up a dirty job on Pollard! If I don't prove all I claim, you can string me up to keep my pard company!"

"Never mind me—set them on her track!" cried Pollard, eagerly, his noble nature never showing more truly than in that speech.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A TURN OF THE WHEEL.

DESPITE her firm resolve, Imo Thorpe gave a start and broke the evenness of her breath as she caught those seemingly damning words from the lips of Tick Slater.

God above! could it be that Rex—her Rex!—had instigated her capture? Could it be that she had been cruelly deceived in him, even from the very first?

Was it possible that, after all, he was the guilty one, whose ruthless hand had completed her orphanhood? Was he indeed the divorced husband of La Gitana?

Apparently the two ruffians were too busy over their pipes and liquor to take alarm at that start or change of breathing, for neither deigned to cast a glance toward their captive, talking all the more openly.

"Then he really did plug the ole gent?"

"Bet yer sweet life!" nodded Slater, emphatically. "He knowed his weddin' cake wouldn't never git even as fur's the dough, ef the daddy wasn't putt out o' the way."

"What a durn botch he made out of it, though! Thar was that prent o' his hand on—"

"Which he never knowed it ontel the racket was kicked up. Then it was too late, an' though he'd set a halibi in trim, 'twas a turrible narrow squeak fer his thrapple—now I'm tellin' ye, pard!"

"But the gal couldn't make it come that he done the job?"

"She was too mighty dead stuck onto him—see?"

"Yit—he hired us to tote her off this way!"

"Jest so's he could sot her free an' climb still funder 'way up in her 'fections," laughed Slater, who seemed to have an answer ready for everything. "An'—but I'm only makin' a guess at this, mind ye, pard! An' mebbe he counts on gittin' her so hot she'll run off 'ith him fer a preacher, 'thout takin' the trouble to let her folks know she's safe ontel the halter's firm hitched. See?"

There was no reply from his comrade in sin, for just then a dark object came stumbling through the entrance, accompanied by a lot of loosened dirt and shale.

The two ruffians uttered angry curses, but one of them reeled back with a horrible cry as a bright flash shot out, and Tick Slater also yelped viciously as another shot bore his own revolver company.

"Down, durn ye!" cried a hoarse, muffled voice, as that dark figure leaped like a ball upon the rascal, bearing him to the rock floor with a shock that deprived Slater of his senses. "Miss Imy—honey!"

Breathless, terrified, the maiden had witnessed that brief but bloody scene, sitting on her rude pallet, unable to flee or even utter a cry; but as she heard that familiar voice a scream of joy broke from her blanched lips.

"Daddy—dear Daddy Rule! Heaven be praised!"

"Daddy—yas, it's Daddy, honey dove," laughed the old man, his tones strangely faint and unnatural, his movements so totally unlike his usual springy action as he staggered toward the pallet—to fall heavily in front of Imo, spasmodically gripping her arm.

"Daddy!" she quavered, turning faint and sick at heart.

"I ketched it—hard," huskily panted the old man. "Don't—don't forget—paper, Miss Imy!"

Imo moaned with anguish as she felt his grip relax and saw his bared head fall dully to the floor.

"Daddy—dear Daddy Rule!"

The prostrate figure stirred faintly, and there came the name:

"Imy—"

"I'm tied—I'm helpless, and you are dying! Oh, Daddy, Daddy!"

"Stiddy—brace up, durn ye!" and with a desperate effort the wounded man lifted his head, that oburgation directed at himself rather than the sobbing maiden.

He managed to draw a knife and cut her hands loose before weakness again overpowered him.

"Go tie—devils!" he gasped, with a glance toward Tick Slater, who was just then giving signs of recovering from that heavy fall.

Imo sprang to her feet and flung a few dry sticks on the fire, then gazed half bewilderedly about her. She saw a coiled lariat near the fire, and snatching that up she hastened to wind it about the form of Tick Slater, closing her ears to his doleful groans and mumbled curses. With Rule Keeler's knife she cut the rope in two, but as she started to bind the other ruffian, she recoiled with a faint cry and shiver.

He was beyond harming any human being more. Rule's lead had passed directly through his brain, entering squarely between the eyes.

"Miss Imy?" faintly called out the old man, lifting his head from the floor.

"Yes, Daddy—dear Daddy!" sobbed the maiden, kneeling at his side and with trembling hands searching for his wound.

"Never mind—I've got it too hard, honey," grimly smiled the veteran, though his strength seemed to be coming back to him, for he took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips.

Imo bent over him, kissing his cold, damp brow, hot tears streaming from her eyes as she felt him shrink back with a low cry. She thought she had hurt his wound, unconsciously, but she had only hurt his heart.

"Don't—'tain't fitten fer sech as you to kiss sech a wicked ole cuss as me, Miss Imy!" he huskily murmured.

"You gave your life to save me—you are dying that I may live. Poor Daddy! if I could only share your pain and suffering!"

"I ain't— Now, honey bird," a wan smile creeping into his haggard face. "Miss Imy?"

"Dear old Daddy Rule?"

"He ain't dead—Tick Slater?"

A groaning curse from that rascal was sufficient answer, and rallying his powers, Rule Keeler managed to add:

"Make him 'fess, honey! Make him say he lied 'bout the boss! I kin sw'ar better, but make him own up 'fore he croaks!"

"After I've looked at your wound, Daddy, dear."

"No use—I've plugged it up 'ith a fold o' cloth. No use to bother, honey. Make him 'fess, then git your hoss an' ride fer home."

But Imo persisted, and too weak to resist her, the old man yielded.

She was greatly encouraged when she saw how seemingly slight the injury was; only a little round hole, bleeding but a trifle.

"Why, Daddy, you'll be sound as ever in a day or two!" she cried, brightening up as she bandaged the hurt, by his directions plugging up the little hole.

"Yes—afere then, mebbe, honey," smiled the old man, saying naught to dishearten the poor child. "Now—make him 'fess up to it all!"

Tick Slater was groaning and cursing by turns, but as Imo drew near he piteously begged her to look to his hurt.

"I'm bleedin' like a stuck hog, miss! Stop it or I'll— Hell and furies!" with a howl of agony as his attempt to move caused the shattered bones to grate together.

His right arm was broken, Keeler's shot having shattered his elbow terribly, and though his wound was not necessarily fatal, if attended to in time, it gave him exquisite torture.

"Make him 'fess, fu'st!" huskily cried Rule Keeler.

"I'll do it—I'll tell all I know," moaned the miserable rascal. "Lee Chandler hired us—devil toast him! He's safe an' sound, while I'm a cripple fer life! I'll hang him ef I kin!"

Still spurred on by Rule Keeler, Imo questioned the wounded ruffian until he confessed all he could tell. It proved Rex Pollard innocent of the abduction, but Tick Slater solemnly swore he knew nothing more of how Bailey Thorpe met his death, than did all of Round-up City.

"Never mind, Miss Imy," said Keeler, encouragingly. "It'll all come out right in the eend. You'll know—but 'twasn't the boss—I'll stick up fer that clean through!"

Imo changed the bonds so as to leave Tick Slater's crippled arm free, and bandaged it as well as she could with the poor materials at her disposal, then turned to Daddy Rule, whose looks and wandering speech began to frighten her sorely.

But she flatly refused to abandon him, as he begged her, time and again, and then he seemed to grow too weak and delirious to repeat his plea.

"It's a long road, honey," he said, once, smiling faintly into her tear wet face as she bent over him. "A long an' weary road, but I'm mighty nigh the eend, now! I'm gittin' thar—I kin 'most see little Molly—my wife!"

He seemed to sleep, but then he started up with a low cry:

"You hain't lost it—the paper, Miss Imy?"

"No, Daddy, it is safe at home."

"Don't fergit—tell her—I died—sorry fer all!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IN THE HOUR OF HIS TRIUMPH.

"HOLD, gentlemen!" cried Lee Chandler, as, almost without exception, the horsemen who had borne him company to Three Mile Motte showed an intention of following after Will Thorpe in headlong haste.

"Hold be durned!" blurted out one of them, hotly. "It's time Rex Pollard run up a tree, and I'm bound to have a finger in 'the pie!"

"Dollars to dimes we come to hock before you even clape eyes on the soda," laughed the gambler, using terms which he knew would be most readily understood by his little audience. "And if we can't find the panther, what's to hinder us

from having a rare good trailing? Who's in for a man-hunt, with the almost certainty of helping a charming young lady out of an ugly scrape?"

That swift speech checked even the headlong member, and as they paused, half-convicted, half in doubt, the dog gave an eager whimper and started away as though he had really struck a trail.

"Steady, gents!" warned Chandler, himself rushing forward and catching his dog, dragging it back to where the trampled space was found. "Give us room according to our size, and we'll spread glory all over Rack-about Range a foot thick!"

Waving the others back under pretense of fearing they might destroy or disturb the scent in their eagerness, the Round-up sharp bent over his dog—apparently a mongrel, though with foxhound and setter blood predominating—and seemed trying to make sure he was taking the correct scent.

Which was precisely what Lee Chandler was doing!

In his hand was hidden a tiny bag of some odorous substance that appeared to have a powerful attraction for the dog, who swallowed it, envelope and all. Then, his senses sharpened by the fact that Tick Slater had tied a bag of the stuff to each hoof of his horse before leaving Three Mile Motte with their captive, the cur ran rapidly off on that trail.

With a grimly exultant cheer, Lee Chandler vaulted into his saddle and followed after the dog, his friends following close at his heels.

Only once or twice did the eager dog make a break or come to fault, and each time the Round-up sharp proved himself a marvelously acute tracker, or else his instinct guided him with precious little delay to the right spot for picking up the broken trail.

"Lucky you set off in such a holy hurry, Chandler," laughed one of the little company, after such an exhibition of the Prince of Round-up. "Just as well you didn't grant us time enough to make our bets, or I, for one, would kick like a bay steer. The dog's a rare one, but with you to back it—"

"It's a straight flush, pulled from the highest branch!" chimed in another.

Chandler smiled grimly as he cast a swift glance over their admiring faces, but his tones were far more earnest than mirthful as he made reply:

"I'm trailing the lady I love, gentlemen. I don't think I *could* go wrong if I had neither eyes, ears, hands or feet; my heart would tell me where to go!"

As we have already seen, the trail was a long one, though it led in a fairly direct line toward the hill region, and though the company made rapid progress, only delayed a few times when the mongrel seemed to lose the scent on especially unfavorable ground, the sun had nearly gained the meridian before Lee Chandler, with a gesture of warning to his friends, leaped from his horse and caught his dog by the collar.

"Wait here for me, gentlemen!" he hurriedly muttered, then moving on with his dog, without vouchsafing an explanation of his action.

There were no signs of human life with their own exception, and uneasily handling their weapons, the trailers watched the movements of the Round-up Sharp and his canine companion.

"Even up he's caught sight of the end!" nodded one of the party, who had been deeply impressed by the united skill of both man and cur.

"If he has— Well, if Pollard is holding that end, there'll be material for a funeral!"

"I'll give you two to one on Chandler, if he isn't dropped before he can pull a gun."

"You want the diamond cinch, don't you?" sneered the man addressed, making use of the cowboy term for a "dead sure thing."

"I only want— Look at 'em, will you?"

This sharp ejaculation was drawn from his lips by the sudden division of master and dog, the latter breaking away from Chandler's relaxing grip, and darting off at a sharp angle, nose sweeping from side to side in search of that intoxicating scent.

The Round-up Sharp made no effort to call back the dog, nor did he once turn his gaze from a certain point in advance, up the rather steep slope. And even as the men below watched with eager gaze, he drew a revolver, and plunged boldly through a fringe of bushes, seemingly running headlong against a rocky steep.

A single instant of breathless suspense to the horsemen below; then came the muffled report of gun or pistol, accompanied by a wild cry, either of intense rage or stinging agony.

That cry broke from the lips of Lee Chandler, and though he had plunged down into the little den, where Tick Slater and his comrade in crime had carried Imo Thorpe the night before, it was not the gambler's pistol that awoke the dull echoes.

Pale, stern, defiant, Imo Thorpe stood waiting the arrival of the scheming lover, to whom she owed such a bitter death, for she had long since

discovered the approach of the trailers, and had up to the last nourished hopes that Rex Pollard was at their head.

Then she recognized Pollard's rival, and with a hasty warning to poor Rule Keeler, she took one of Tick Slater's pistols, and stood at bay.

"Imo—darling!" broke softly, yet eagerly from the lips of the gambler, as he recklessly (?) plunged through the fringe of bushes, and leaped down the short descent to the floor of the den. "I'll rescue you, or die at your dear feet!"

"I hope to see you die on the gallows, vile assassin!" sternly cried the maiden, warning him back with armed hand.

A loud explosion closely followed her words, and Lee Chandler uttered a wild cry as his right arm dropped helplessly to his side.

"Fer the boss, durn ye!" gasped Rube Keeler, sinking back on the rude pallet, the smoking revolver dropping from his failing grasp.

Imo Thorpe shivered and turned pale at that unexpected happening, but she instantly rallied, and with pistol covering the wounded plotter, she sternly warned him:

"You are my prisoner, Lee Chandler! Try to escape, and I'll shoot you without mercy!"

"Imo—"

"Silence, you cur! I know all—your evil tools have confessed everything, and now—"

With loud cheers the party without were rushing up the hill to back their leader in case of need, and Imo lifted her voice to cry:

"Help, gentlemen! A woman asks you to help secure for her this arch-criminal, Lee Chandler!"

"Everything goes, gents," cried Chandler, with a short, hard laugh as the little den began to fill with armed men, eager to strike the enemy. "Miss Thorpe has taken a notion I'm her enemy—"

"I can prove him guilty!" flashed the maiden, swiftly. "I can prove that he hired these rascally men to abduct me. If you are white men, with a spark of honor remaining, arrest him for me!"

"I've only one good hand left, gentlemen, and that goes up without a murmur," coldly uttered the Round-up Sharp, suiting the action to the words. "As for you, Miss Thorpe, only one word: before this hour Rex Pollard has suffered death for stealing you from your friends!"

Imo staggered back before that terrible blow, but as quickly rallied. It was only the last effort of an utterly defeated schemer. She would not permit him to enjoy even a baseless triumph now!

"Bind the cur, gentlemen," she coldly ordered, keeping Chandler ever under her weapon. "Look to his hurt, if you will, but bind him beyond the power of even attempting an escape. For, as high Heaven hears me speak, I'll shoot him dead at the first sign of flight!"

"A lady speaks, pards," laughed Chandler, lightly. "Her word should be law to all gentlemen. Bind me tight. It will be only one thing more for her to ask pardon for when she learns the whole truth."

Still puzzled, still bewildered, the men obeyed, though their bonds were very lightly applied, and even a crippled man would have found no serious difficulty in casting them off should he try. But nothing seemed further from Lee Chandler's thoughts. He looked and acted like an innocent man, and hardly one present besides Imo but felt he was innocent, in fact and in deed.

And she was now bending over Daddy Rule, whose last breath was a prayer of caution concerning his "will."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A VOICE FROM THE GRAVE.

NOT until he caught sight of Rex Pollard, free and unharmed, riding swiftly at the head of a strong company toward them, did Lee Chandler lose his strange composure.

"The dog is dead, I reckon, gentlemen!" he hoarsely cried as Imo, with a sobbing cry, set spurs to her horse and dashed off at full speed to meet the party, among whom Pollard, Grip-sack Sid and Will Thorpe were prominent. "Don't let that accursed assassin crow over a crippled man. If he tries it, turn me loose, give me a gun, and I'll let him cheat the gallows, even yet!"

But Rex Pollard made no attempt to openly triumph over his fallen rival, for with Imo, smiling, laughing, sobbing, talking all at the same time, he seemed only too glad to draw apart from the rest in her sweet company.

Explanations were quickly made. A party pressed on to the hills, for the purpose of bringing in Tick Slater, burying his mate, and providing conveyance to the Shuttlecock for poor Rule Keeler.

The others, with Lee Chandler still a prisoner, turned back toward Round-up City.

And when the town was reached, Lee Chandler was taken to the house of the city marshal, to have his broken arm properly dressed before having the charges against him fully investigated.

Through it all he bore a bold front, declaring that he was innocent of all wrong, and a victim

to the cunning arts of his rival, the owner of Shuttlecock Ranch.

"It's his last stake, but he'll never win. I'll live to see him pull hemp for the foul murder of Bailey Thorpe. And as far as my bank account holds out, I'm open to bet two to one on that!"

Imo, with Rex Pollard, Will Thorpe, Grip-sack Sid and a number of other friends, made their way at once to the Diamond Cross Ranch, and no one listened more intently to her recital than did the Sample Sport.

But where others seemed most deeply interested in her own adventures, Grip-sack Sid was keenest over the strange eagerness which Rule Keeler had shown in the document he had left with Imo for safe-keeping.

"And this paper, Miss Thorpe?" he asked, at length. "It is where you can get at it handily?"

Imo shivered a bit and her cheeks paled a trifle. It brought back the memory of the man who had given his life to save her from her enemies, and just then the poor girl so badly needed all sunshine.

"I wouldn't insist," slowly added the other, "but unless I'm 'way off, in that same paper lies a solution of the mystery which has worked so much trouble in Rack-about Range."

"What?" ejaculated Rex Pollard, turning pale. "You don't mean—"

"If wrong, I'll apologize to the dead," was the grave interruption. "But I firmly believe that Rule Keeler killed Bailey Thorpe!"

Imo gave a cry of hot indignation and flatly turned her back on the man who dared to so cruelly brand her "Daddy Rule," but Will Thorpe made a secret sign which quickly drew both his uncle and the Sample Sport out of the room.

"Father, you must open the safe and get that paper. We must follow up every chance until the whole truth is known."

"But—you have grounds for accusing Keeler?" hesitated Thorpe, blinking perplexedly at the Sample Sport.

"Only based on instinct," was the grave reply. "I did believe Lee Chandler was the murderer, until Miss Thorpe told her story."

"And I felt that Rex Pollard was the guilty man!" frowned Will, the puzzle seeming deeper than ever. "Now a dead man is implicated, and the least we can do is to clear him of—"

"Or prove him guilty through his own words!" bowed Grip-sack Sid.

As to the shortest way out of this fresh complication, Chester Thorpe opened his safe and produced the small packet intrusted to Imo by Rule Keeler, breaking the seal and hastily running his eyes over the lines found therein, to shortly drop the paper and stagger back with a choking cry of mingled wonder, rage and chagrin.

"He *was* the man, then?" asked Grip-sack Sid, with a long breath of relief. "I felt it was so, the moment Miss Thorpe spoke of his strange anxiety for her to open the packet as soon as he was dead."

The mystery of who killed Bailey Thorpe was a mystery no longer.

Rule Keeler shot him, in revenge for a bitter wrong committed when both men were young, living far away from Diamond Cross Ranch.

There is no especial need for a full copy of the confession left behind by Rule Keeler, since a synopsis will serve our purpose just as well.

Many years before, Bailey Thorpe had robbed Rule Keeler—who was then known by a different name—of his young and silly wife.

The shock turned Keeler's brain, and for many years he remained an inmate of an insane asylum. At length he was discharged as cured, and at once set out to hunt up the destroyer of his home.

He found him at length, a prosperous cattleman, rich, happy and contented. And without fear of being recognized by his old enemy, Rule Keeler sought and obtained a position on the Diamond Cross.

His chance came at last, shortly after Rex Pollard and Bailey Thorpe quarreled over Imo, and he remorselessly carried out the cunning scheme which he had formed, killing Thorpe and providing for his own safety by leaving the thumbless print of his left hand on the bosom of his victim, which was done by shielding his thumb from the blood.

At that time, he neither hated nor loved Rex Pollard, only choosing him as a scape-goat because of that recent quarrel, but as has already been explained, shortly after the murder Rex Pollard risked his life to save that of Keeler, and from that day up to his death, the murderer suffered bitterly from remorse.

Broken though his life was, he still clung to it, and only in case Rex Pollard should be again brought under the gallows, was he prepared to confess all. In such a crisis, he meant to kill himself, and thus clear the ranchero from obloquy.

The whole truth made known, Lee Chandler was turned loose, none of the Thorpes wishing to prosecute him for the abduction. And dis-

posing of his property in Round-up City, he left Rack-about Range forever.

Pollard gladly accepted the apologies of those who had been most bitter against him, and shortly after the first anniversary of Bailey Thorpe's death, he made Imo his wife.

Sidney Harper was one of the guests, of course, though he had to come many miles to reach the scene in time. Few present knew him as other than he claimed to be; a "drummer," busily working for the best interests of "Our House."

But the exceptions knew him as a detective, who had come to Rack-about Range expressly to solve the mystery of Bailey Thorpe's death.

Tick Slater lost his arm, and was banished from the Range, under penalty of death should he ever venture back.

"Raw-Beef Bill" Crumple recovered from his hurt, but he also faded out of the memory of Round-up City, and his "wolfish" howl was never again heard in that vicinity.

Having confessed that Lee Chandler was at the bottom of that unexpected display at the opening of the new opera house, he working the slides after binding and pretending to drug La Gitana and her brother; and having confessed that her story of a stolen child and a prior claim on Rex Pollard was all false, La Gitana and her brother were permitted to go their way unpunished.

Nor were the two thugs who attempted to "remove" Grip-sack ever brought to justice.

"Let 'em flicker!" laughed the Sample Sport. "Only for them I might never have caught up with dainty Belle. And if I hadn't pinched her, just as I did, Rex Pollard might have pulled hemp in good earnest."

"So—once more—let them go. We've got all we asked for, and to grunt for more would be playing the live porker!"

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, PUBLISHERS,
98 William Street, New York.